



# Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction

*Jessica Hagedorn (Editor)*

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The writers included in this ground-breaking anthology are exhilarating in their differences: cultural backgrounds, age range, literary styles. From Jose Garcia Villa's minimalist "Untitled Story, " first published in 1933, to Meena Alexander's "Manhattan Music, " with its razor-sharp look at the hip downtown New York art scene of the troubled 1990s, their stories sweep across the twentieth century and across the range of Asian American experience. These characters make love, worry about the future, endure hardships. They audition for jobs as anchormen. They are displaced, assimilated, rebellious. They lie and cheat; they betray themselves and others. These are stories about Asian Americans, yes, but, finally, they are stories about life.

## **Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction Details**

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## From Reader Review Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction for online ebook

### Randy says

Read many of the stories while in college. Now I'm reading all the Filipino stories.

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### Jaba says

Love short story excerpts about culture and sexuality. Definately the type of books I love to read.

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### Aileen Yee says

I was introduced to a diverse group of Asian/Asian-American writers with different styles and senses of humor. I name this one of my favorite books because it was my stepping stone into the world of Asian-American literature and experience.

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### Kaion says

*Charlie Chan is Dead* was published in 1993, but feels in some ways a lot older than that. I mean, the last (unsuccessful) reboot of the franchise was in 1981. How many people under the age of forty know who Charlie Chan is; have read one of his books or seen one of his films?

1993 was also the year of the film adaptation of Amy Tan's bestselling *The Joy Luck Club*, the most high-profile Asian American film to date—which says sad things about the movie industry, but marks *Charlie Chan is Dead* as a document coming right at the point where "Asian American" was going mainstream.

In the preface, Elaine Kim addresses this transformation by contextualizing it in the history of the Asian American movement. Particularly she unsparing about her participation in the "dark side" of identity politics, how the movement to define "Asian American" constructed a "hierarchy of authenticity to separate the 'real' from the 'fake'". The total result of which was the systematic exclusion of voices deemed 'not Asian American enough', that is: too female, too queer, too Asian, too American, too bourgeois, etc.

In the light of this history, the diversity of voices included in this anthology is, for Kim, not only heartening, but a symbol of the movement's shift towards acceptance of the "fluid and migratory" nature of Asian American identity. And not coincidentally, a great resource for finding some of the more buried or obscure early Asian American writers.

What is an anthology anyway? Some are definitely treatises, others are lecture series or award ceremonies, but the best—the best are conversations. Primarily between editors/writers and readers, but also as I make my way through an anthology, the stories begin to function as conversations between the writers themselves.

Consider the case of two tales of young men coming to America. Carlos Bulosan's "**I would remember**" is stark bordering on bleak; his protagonist's optimism is at each turn confronted with shocking violence. Jose Garcia Villa's "**Untitled Story**", in contrast, is impressionistic and delicate; his protagonist the son of a rich merchant who has sent him off to college in America to break up a undesirable love affair. At first melancholic and homesick, he eventually comes around to the possibility of reinvention away from the homeland.

Both stories draw upon their own author's biographies —Bulosan's experiences as a migrant worker and labor organizer and Garcia Villa's reinvention as the modernist poet "Doveglion"— and despite many differences, both stories are imbued with the same acute feeling of exile of the immigrant.

The story that I found the most haunting, however, is also the story that most embraces the idea of "fluid and migratory" identity. Diana Chang's aptly titled "**Falling Free**" is the story of an elderly Chinese-American woman left alone after her husband returns permanently to China without her. In soaring first-person, she revels in her newfound freedom of mind and body, even as well-meaning neighbors and her grandson think she's going dotty. On being Chinese, she muses:

*All of us are Chinese some of the time, I say. But I'm not certain what I mean. Other times, I'm a Calvinist, familiar with dimity and yokes. My favorite summer dress is Danish, my gold ring Greek, my face cream French, my daydreams I can't place. For someone so unsure of who I am, from time to time I have such definite statements to make. My thoughts are reckless, braver than Ying's. Yet, for decades, I ignored Timothy, ignored even the thoughts I refused to think.*  
*That is Chinese.*

Diana Chang was one of the earliest Asian American writers and artists —her novel *Frontiers of Love* was published in 1956— but has not attracted comparable attention as such. Partly this is because she never featured the "Asian American question" in her novels (though she her poetry and short stories). And partly, it's out of Chang's own ambivalence towards categorizations; she stated in interviews she most wanted her writing to address the "human".

Well, shouldn't that be the point? We need to reclaim these categories, so we can reclaim our rights to be human too— not to be defined by a narrow selection of caricatures, to forge our own models. For Chang, identity is a process, a negotiation that her protagonist calls conversation between "the two of me— the me and the you", where "you" may well also be the reader.

*It comes of talking to oneself; however, which one of us would stop me? We laugh together.  
You tell me who's to stop us.*

Rating: 4 stars

### **Other notable stories:**

"Eucalyptus" Hisaye Yamamoto DeSoto

"The Bread of Salt" N.V.M. Gonzalez

"excerpt from *The Floating World*" Cynthia Kadohata

"They Like You Because You Eat Dog, So What Are You Gonna Do About It?" R. Zamora Linmark

"Sugar & Salt" Ninotchka Rosca

"Talking to the Dead" Sylvia Watanabe

"Empty Heart" Lois Ann Yamanaka

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**Jana says**

a great compilation of asian american authors... a definite learning tool...

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**Fei says**

As always with short story collections, it's a mixed bag of good and bad ones. But this is probably the least enjoyable collection of short stories I've read recently, unfortunately. Some were good, most were meh, and some were downright terrible.

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**Kathleen says**

I liked it. I liked it a lot.

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**Ke says**

This anthology has some great stories that may interest Asians and other nationals alike. One of my favorites was Yamauchi's That Was All.

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**Amber says**

A series of impossibly bad editorial choices made by the evidently over-political Ms. Hagedorn. Most of the authors selected were quite good, and a number of the stories were as well. However, as an anthology, this book failed.

I'll make a point of seeking out these authors in other formats.

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