MIGRATION, MEMORY, IDENTITY: AN OVERVIEW AND INTERVIEW OF SHERRY THOMAS'S WRITING *

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Abstract

Sherry Thomas began publishing romance novels in 2008. Her initial works were set in Victorian England, a setting frequently seen in this sub-genre of romance fiction. Thomas branched out into Young Adult fantasy romance in 2013 and self-published a Young Adult novel in 2014, as well as an adult romance novel starring the same female protagonist, with Berkley. It included a bi-racial heroine, who shared some of Thomas's own Chinese heritage, and were partly set in late Ch'ing-era China (1883-91). She then launched the gender-flipped Lady Sherlock series with Berkley in 2016, which has a "slow-burn" romance plot but focuses on the mystery element, and published a contemporary mystery and a futuristic fantasy in 2025. This overview of her work, followed by an interview, documents her writing and publishing choices. After a round-up of her novels and novellas, the conversation records her experiences with publishing in a white-centering space and whether she has consciously negotiated with the dominant narratives it has cultivated. It is also a portrait of a Chinese American romance author whose knowledge of Chinese web novels and Chinese literature reoriented the genre's representation of love and history for readers like me, a non-white romance reader and scholar.

Keywords: Publishing, Romantasy, Asian American, Wuxia, Diversity, China, Sherlock Holmes.

MIGRACÓN, MEMORIA, IDENTIDAD:
UNA PANORÁMICA Y ENTREVISTA A SHERRY THOMAS

Resumen

Sherry Thomas comenzó a publicar novela romántica en 2008, inicialmente ambientada en la Inglaterra victoriana. En 2013, se adentra en la fantasía romántica juvenil con la autopublicación de una novela, así como una novela romántica para adultxs protagonizada por la misma heroína birracial que comparte su herencia china. En 2016 lanza *Lady Sherlock*, que incorpora *slow burn romance*, pero con misterio, y en 2025 una novela de misterio contemporánea y una fantasía futurista. Tras repasar su obra, la conversación aborda sus experiencias en un espacio literario marcado por la blanquitud y su relación con las narrativas dominantes del género. La entrevista perfila a la autora cuya familiaridad con las *web novels* chinas y la literatura china ha reorientado la representación del amor y de la historia dentro del género para lectoras asiática como yo.

Palabras claves: Industria editorial, romantasy, asiático-americano, Wuxia, diversidad, China, victoriano, Sherlock Holmes.

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1. OVERVIEW

Sherry Thomas is an award-winning author whose work ranges from romance fiction to historical mysteries, as well as Young Adult (YA) novels covering sub-genres like paranormal fantasy and wuxia martial arts sagas. An Asian American who came to the United States from mainland China as a teenager, she has a multi-racial family and lives in Austin, Texas. Her novels and novellas have gathered a significant following, garnered numerous accolades and awards, and made their way onto many best-of lists. Thomas began publishing romance novels in 2008 with Bantam, starting with the historical romance *Private Arrangements*, followed by *Delicious* (2008), *Not Quite a Husband* (2009), and *His at Night* (2010). These initial novels featured white British protagonists (both landed gentry and skilled working professionals). Three of the plots are set in Victorian England, a common choice in the historical romance sub-genre at the time, but *Not Quite a Husband* (*NQH*) unfolds in a less familiar space –the northwest region of the Indian sub-continent during the 1897 Siege of Malakand, an anti-colonial attack against a British garrison. Starting in 2012, Berkley brought out her subsequent historical romances, termed the Fitzhugh family series: *Beguiling the Beauty*, *Ravishing the Heiress*, and *Tempting the Bride*, plus two connected short stories, the last in 2014. Thomas also branched out into YA fantasy romance (the sub-genre recently dubbed "romantasy") in 2013 with the Elemental trilogy (from Harper Collins' Balzer+Bray teen imprint). The second book in the series was published in 2014 and the final one in 2015. Set in a magical feudal universe ruled by a fascist empire, it follows two teen mages destined to mount a revolution. *The Luckiest Lady in London* had also been published in 2013 and the Heart of Blade duology in 2014 comprising of a YA novel called *The Hidden Blade* (*THB*) and the same protagonist's adult romance (set a few years after the events of *THB*), titled *My Beautiful Enemy* (*MBE*). Two things distinguish this duology from previous work: Thomas self-published the YA title while Berkley published the adult romance novel in mass-market (as part of her final two-book contract for historical romance with them); second, the Heart of Blade stories was partly set in Ch'ing-era China and included a bi-racial heroine, who shares some of Thomas's own Chinese heritage.

My own interest in both Heart of Blade books goes back a decade. On Thomas's web site, she terms the initial idea for it as "my *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* meets *Forsyte Saga.*" The references are to the soulful flying-martial-arts movie by Ang Lee that introduced global audiences to the popular wuxia form –a Chinese popular fiction genre adapted for the screen by directors in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the twentieth century– and John Galsworthy's Victorian family drama. Alongside Thomas's familiar evocative prose, the narrative was also striking to me for being deeply rooted in a landscape that was nearer to the land of my birth, but which had till then been outside my literary and media imagination (both Asian and the one colored by Anglo-colonization). *MBE*'s flashback sections, set in 1883 on the Silk

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Road, radiated westward from Ch'ing/Qing-Empire Peking to the foothills of the Tian Shan and the western edges of the Xinjiang region into Chinese Turkestan's Tarim Basin, edging around the Takla Makan desert toward the cities of Kashgar and Yarkand. These sections are peppered with references to oases and towns that were nodes of a commercial and religious network that saw people of different ethnicities who traversed these stretches –Kazakh, Uyghur, Kyrgyz, Han, and Mongol, not to mention Europeans going through the mountain passes south to India. It mentioned a babel of languages used by these travelers and of a multiplicity of faiths that testified to the area's Muslim and Buddhist histories– a thriving socio-political diversity that contrasted sharply with what I knew of twentieth century state repressions and present-day genocides unfolding in those regions. While I had read English language romance novels set in China before this one (e.g. *China Bride* (2000) by Mary Jo Putney), *MBE* made these Central and Western Asian expanses come alive in a way that those works had not. In *MBE*, this unfamiliar backdrop felt integral to the protagonist's quest for identity rather than wallpaper for Western stories. But Thomas doubled down on the novel's geographic vastness, with the story's present day (1891) narrative beginning with a prolog on a ship to London from Asia, bringing the alien heroine –an idea I explored in my last book (2023)– to an England at once familiar to her through her English education in China, (and to the average historical romance reader), yet strange when seen through her eyes.

MBE also flips intermittently to the male character's point of view and the start of the love story in 1883 in Chinese Turkestan. Eventually, the 1891 plot takes the protagonists back to China, with an interlude in a cave of Buddhist scriptures carved in stone, alluding to historically valuable sites like the Mogao caves in Gangsu province. One of my current projects is to explore the way those cave sections conjure up a Buddhist past and its encounters with state repression in previous centuries in the same way that Thomas's novel itself is functioning in relation to recent Chinese history. My understanding of *MBE* in this regard has also profited from scholar Eric M. Selinger's (2022) analytical and pedagogical approaches to the *Heart of Blade* duology. Selinger analyzes the settings of the novels, and of Thomas's *NQH*, as well as the inter-racial romance in *My Beautiful Enemy* as representing a multi-ethnic and multi-religious world, and draws insightful connections between Thomas's references to Buddhist philosophy and romantic love.

All this is to say that the novel reconfigured for me the existing English-language romance fiction genre I had been reading since the 1980s (starting in my pre-teen years in India) and studying for almost two decades in the US. Thomas has been a gracious interlocutor while I have been on this journey as well. She has answered questions through social media and also been a respondent when I did a talk (AAARI 2023, minute 51:10) on my book chapter on romance heroines and citizenship (Kamblé 2023).[1]

[1] The chapter shows how *MBE*'s bi-racial traveler heroine foregrounds the question of women's precarious political identity and the insider/outsider status they occupy—a theme present in

Thomas's second self-published novel, which was also her first contemporary romance, *The One in My Heart*, appeared in 2015. I asked whether she queried this novel with a traditional publisher and she said she did not. She self-published it because at that time, publishers took on contemporary novels only if you committed to several and she did not have other contemporary romances planned. The story is set in present-day US (Connecticut/New York city) and has white protagonists. The novel is notable for an unusual twin narrative –the main male character's past love affair with a much older (now deceased) woman shadows the ostensible main romance plot. While Thomas plays with intertwining past and present events frequently, the presence of a previous love object is a distinctive element rarely seen in her other work.

After this novel, Thomas veered away from romance, venturing into the sub-genre of historical mysteries with women sleuths. Mainstays of these popular "lady detective" stories include writers like Tracy Grant, Anna Lee Huber, Tasha Alexander, Darcy Wilde, and Deanna Raybourn (as well as Jennifer Ashley, though her protagonist in the Below Stairs Mysteries is a cook, while Georgina Clarke's Lizzie Hardwicke is a sex-worker in the eponymous series). Instead of inventing a brand new Victorian investigator, Thomas pitched a gender-flipped Lady Sherlock/Charlotte Holmes series to Berkley, her romance publisher at the time and launched it with *A Study in Scarlet Women* in 2016; it has a "slow-burn" romance sub-plot but centers the mystery element. Her detective is a woman who has engineered a break from her minor-aristocrat family to escape a suitable marriage; now she lives in an independent household by pretending to be the sister-cum-assistant to a homebound (non-existent) problem-solver named Sherlock Holmes. Charlotte is assisted by an ensemble of characters that Holmes fans will recognize, though Watson is also gender-flipped (as are some others) and Thomas's Victorian world is more diverse in other ways as well, including in terms of sexual and bodily diversity, perhaps testifying to Thomas's familiarity with fan-fic (in which readers often redo their favorite works with such inclusion in mind). The Lady Sherlock series is now at eight books and counting; book nine is scheduled for fall 2026.

Thomas has continued to focus on the series in the last decade, except for a sci-fi/space fantasy novella, *The Heart is a Universe* (2017), and a Mulan re-telling, *The Magnolia Sword* (2019). The former was requested for the story collection *Sight Unseen* by Open Ink Press; the latter, a rewrite of the well-known folk tale/ballad but with a love plot, was published with Lee and Low, a multicultural publisher for children. The Mulan tale has been written/composed for centuries in China in a range of literary and staged forms, prose and verse. Disney's animated and live-action versions of *Mulan* (1998 and 2020, respectively) are only the latest to draw on that tale in English.

In 2025, Thomas shifted genre gears again, publishing *The Librarians*, a murder mystery set in present-day Austin, Texas, with Penguin Random House. While its A-plot revolves around two homicides, it has two characters whose joint story

all romance novels in direct or unsaid ways.

holds palimpsests of her classic romance novels –a second chance at love for a couple whose initial connection was electric but went unfulfilled. *The Librarians* also departs from Lady Sherlock's largely white cast of characters to return to Thomas's 2014/2019 foray into ethnically diverse representation, and uses dual-time narratives/flashbacks. Both protagonists (Hazel and Conrad) in the romance plot are transnational, globe-traveling, wealthy Asians– Hazel is the daughter of a wealthy Singaporean family that descends from the couple in *MBE*. She had separated from her husband, who then turned out to have committed art fraud and disappeared, leaving her to deal with a criminal investigation. At the start of the novel, she has moved to Austin to start a new job at a local library while taking care of an aging grandparent who is settled there. Part of her backstory is that as a young woman on an ocean cruise that had a stop in Madeira, she met a young biracial (Wasian) man and spent the day with him; then they went their own ways and she talked herself into discarding his phone number, an impulsive act she has regretted ever since. When she sees him again in Austin, the old attraction comes roaring back, but she wonders whether he is involved up in the murders that happened by the library branch.

Thomas shows them at two different ages and stages of their lives through the flashbacks and present-day sections of the novel. The latter section also becomes increasingly non-linear as the action progresses and the mystery's resolution approaches, with Thomas revealing events and information in selective chunks that disrupt chronological narrative. We also get part of Conrad's side of the story –that he had figured out the name of the mystery girl who had haunted him after Madeira and that he has been keeping tabs on her online ever since. We learn that he says he never dates Asians, a revelation that feels poignant after his yearning for this one specific Asian woman is revealed. The novel also includes a secondary romance plot –as *THB* did– between Hazel's library colleague and the man on whom he had a crush when they were both high schoolers. While this queer romance has a happy ending, there are two more romance plots that ended unhappily for two others in the ensemble cast. The murder mystery draws all of them in, and as the characters attempt to hide their own pasts, Thomas doles out events from both years ago and a few days and hours ago, disrupting our assumptions and foiling expectations. The shifts in time affect the romance plot as well, since that, too, unfolds through memories and present-day maneuverings by the lovers. Thomas thus mixes the structures of romance and mystery in a Rubik's cube of genre blending.

Even more interesting is a different side-effect of this structure: through the two protagonists' memories of their meeting in Madeira and their respective wealthy Asian (and Asian diaspora) families' behaviors and economic ups and downs, Thomas constructs a new type of Asian representation. She moves away from the older story template and type of the Asian working-class immigrant whose travel and trajectories are one-directional (East to West), whose roots are frozen in amber, and whose post-migration present is solely about first-generation immigrant labor and upward mobility, often in an anti-Asian environment. Instead, we see two people who are romantic leads in a way that is usually reserved for white protagonists in English-language romance novels –beautiful, financially secure, emotionally and sexually desirable and desiring, and politically fluid in terms of national and cultural

identities. It is an intriguing rewriting that redoes old patterns to center the traditional outsider to the West.

Thomas's other 2025 publication is the novella "Prima" in the collection *After the End*, which was steered by a group of authors and produced through a reader-supported million-dollar Kickstarter campaign. "Prima" is set in the waters of the Asia-Pacific in a world in which a fungus has changed both the geographies and workings of all societies. It opens with one protagonist declaring that they will forget the other as they sail away from each other, and subsequent sections switch points of view and time to narrate that decade-old meeting and present-day reunion. It is a classic instance of Thomas's core interest in memories and the impact of one's forced geographic movement on identity and the ability to love and receive love.

2. INTERVIEW

This interview is an edited compilation of an oral history of Thomas's journey as an author and of her writing and publishing choices. I conducted it in the context of a post-COVID-19-pandemic US and an entertainment print/digital industry that is grappling with a politically fractured landscape and the disruption caused in publishing by the crumbling of the Romance Writers of America, the end of the mass-market-sized historical romance line at Avon romance, and the flood of so-called AI tools.[2] The interview also charts Thomas's imaginative reach across fictionalized fraught cultural and political moments in history, which allude to or are influenced by, our present destabilized world.

The conversation delved into her experiences with publishing in a historically white-led and white-centering industry and explored whether she has consciously negotiated with the dominant narratives of love that it cultivated for decades. It is also a portrait of a Chinese American romance author whose familiarity with Chinese literature and media infuses her English-language story-telling and expanded the horizon of the genre's representation of love and history for me, a South Asian romance reader and researcher. It thus speaks to this special issue's inquiry into the genre's tactical potential for widening its cultural lens and decolonizing affective relationships. The interview was conducted over two long sessions online in the spring and fall of 2025 and has been edited to focus on the above ideas. While most of the answers are paraphrases, with occasional direct quotes, I also inserted short clarifying remarks in box brackets and longer explanations in footnotes.

[2] I use "post" only to suggest the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, not its end, since we continue to deal with its effects on individuals' health, safety, and well-being on a personal and political level.

2.1 Questions and Answers

[JK] What are your early memories of reading and writing or other media in China? Did you use multiple languages? I'm also interested in your memories of coming to the U.S. and of reading and writing or other media after that.

[ST] I read a lot when I was growing up in China. There were not a lot of books, but I read the ones we had at home and those my friends had. My family subscribed to many newspapers: four in Chinese as well as the *China Daily* [an English language newspaper]. I read *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *Twenty Years Later*, the sequel to the *Three Musketeers* in Chinese. I first began learning English with my grandmother and then formally in middle school. When I came to the US, I had received one year of this training and was probably reading at 1st grade level in English, with maybe a vocabulary of about two hundred words.

I borrowed people's books (in Chinese) after coming to the US (and some were slightly "racy"). I soon ran out of those books though and had to resort to classical Chinese poetry before being forced to turn to books in English –*A Wrinkle in Time* was the first one. I remember the love that the characters had for each other in that one and that love saved them. I also read the last *Narnia* novel but did not understand what happened at the end till someone explained it to me later. Around the same time, I encountered romance novels in grocery stores and ones like Walmart/Kmart. I would skim them in the aisles and rejected some because I didn't understand words like "infamous" (which I thought meant "not famous") and "governess" (which I had hoped would be a woman governor).

I think the first romance novel I read was a Johanna Lindsey historical; the heroine's missing underpants is the only detail I recall.[3] I also recall a contemporary romance that I had heard of even in China, where the plot involved a woman being kidnapped in Mexico and then falling in love with the bandit; there is a scene in front of a fire or fireplace.[4] I then found a book about romances that mentioned Rosemary Rogers and I went looking for her novels. [I asked a follow-up about the violence in these novels and if she found them upsetting, as I had.] They were violent but I did not re-read those parts; I went back to the love scenes –I knew exactly where the first ones were– and the last scenes. I didn't like it when the stories were continued, especially if a relationship that had ended happily ran into trouble later. I could not believe in the couple if she kept breaking them up! But I liked Rogers because I thought she was Sri Lankan, unlike other authors, who were all white. I saw her as an outlier. My Sri Lankan acquaintances confirmed

[3] Based on some googling and crowd-sourcing, this could be a medieval romance, possibly *When Love Awaits* (1986) or *Defy Not the Heart* (1989), both from Avon romance.

[4] Another search and crowd-sourcing suggest that this novel might be Janet Dailey's *Touch the Wind* (1979).

that she was Sri Lankan, but I looked her up recently and Wikipedia says she was of Portuguese descent; since I had thought she was ethnic Sri Lankan and could write romance, I figured that I, someone Chinese, could, too.

I did not see myself as a minority or understand American assimilation though. I had no idea what it was to be considered a minority since I grew up as part of a super majority (Han) in China. I came to the US –my mother went to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge– with a strong sense of that identity and spent most of my early years here with Chinese graduate students. So, I didn't have the experience of being an American minority trying to, or being pressured to, assimilate. I did not understand the undercurrents of racism in the country or consider my personal experiences in that light. And I saw the US as a foreign place where I did not expect to be treated as a local –I expected to return to China. So, my experience was different from that of [an Asian American romance author who grew up in the US]. It was not till about age sixteen that the realization that the move was permanent sank in but there was still a possibility of moving back to China to work. But then I got married and it seemed clear that my husband would not be able to move there and work. I then stayed home and did not enter the workforce. [I followed up to ask if she meant that not having to work outside the home blunted the force of racism.] It was a key factor in not experiencing discrimination of all kinds [...] Both the family I grew up in and the family I married into value women and see me as a whole person and not a flattened version based on such things (ethnicity, sex, etc) that are determined at birth.

[JK] Did you study the humanities/literature in college?

[ST] We were an immigrant family so studying the humanities/literature would have been considered self-indulgent. And my grandmother was an English instructor, but my mother was a chemist, my dad was an engineer, and my grandfather taught at a medical college. So most everyone was in STEM and I did not mind STEM either. I was a biochemistry major briefly, but did not like biology and switched to business (an international trade and finance major in an economics department). I meant to study international relations/public policy in graduate school since I was multilingual and had the economics degree, which was attractive to those programs. I was accepted to Harvard's Kennedy school but only offered partial aid, and was considering some other schools, like Georgetown/Johns Hopkins. I deferred the start of the graduate program for marriage and pregnancy but then decided against that path. If I hadn't, maybe I would never have become a writer. To be clear, I didn't have a huge commitment to international relations; an embassy career just felt glamorous.

[JK] Why did you choose to write romance? How did that begin? Did you pick a pseudonym?

[ST] I read a lot of science fiction, most of Asimov, *Dune* (1965), *Childhood's End* (1953), *Lost Horizon* (1933) and romance. My memories of romance novels are of the covers of historical romances being very sexy. I only started thinking

about writing one when I was older and home with a young baby. I likely had undiagnosed Post-Partum Depression. I was doing extreme baking and I was the farthest thing from a trad wife. I was reading a romance by a *New York Times* bestselling author while the baby was napping and "disagreed violently" with it. I got mad that this book wasted the little free time I had. I told my husband at the end of the day –I'm going to write while I'm at home. I had an economics undergrad degree at that time and trying to make a go of writing seemed no worse a financial prospect than being a bank teller, which is what that degree would have let me do.

So that's when I started writing what would eventually become the novel *Private Arrangements*. I had about 90,000 words done when I read *How To Write a Romance and Get it Published*, which said not to join a writers' group till the manuscript was complete and to aim for 120,000 words for a historical. Turns out the book was 10 years old and that word count advice was no longer accurate, but that was what I read in it.[5] I joined a local Romance Writers of America chapter after my manuscript was ready –I had lengthened the 90,000 word one I had to 140,000 by adding a plot twist.

As for the pseudonym, Thomas is my husband's name –he is from India– and I had told him I'd use that if I got published.

I also wanted to write futuristic romance, because I read sci-fi and thought it would be fun to do romance in space. But since there was a lot of historical romance around then, I thought I could get started in publishing with that and then do futuristic ones. I was naïve and did not understand that if you started in one sub-genre, you had to do that at least for a while.

[JK] Who was your agent and which publisher did you begin with? How have those ties grown/changed?

[ST] I started querying agents and one, Sue Yuen, told me that *Private Arrangements* was too long so I stripped it back down to 90,000. That manuscript was followed by the one for *Luckiest Lady in London*. Neither was successful and she dropped me after the second one but she gave me good advice, such as "your stories open at the wrong place. You are writing in chronological order but they need to start after the couple meet again."[6]

I started shopping for another agent and found Kristin Nelson through advice on Miss Snark's blog. [This blog does not appear to be active but there is a website and the page with Kristin Nelson's profile is available (Authoress 2009).] I approached Kristin because she did not require a synopsis –I sent

[5] This book was probably Kathryn Falk's 1990 romance novel writing advice manual.

[6] It seems to me that this advice plus Thomas's dislike of Rogers's tendency to write multiple books for the same couple and breaking them apart after they had reached the genre's requisite happy ending is what has resulted in the core structure of Thomas's romance plots: a second chance at love that incorporates a breakup in the same novel but as painful flashbacks. Her romances end with the couple's happy future assured.

her the manuscript to *Private Arrangements* and she got back to me quickly and the book sold soon after.

[JK] Did you consciously decide to write white characters because the market was for historical romance novels and there were white people in them? And did your agents/editors ask you why you were writing white characters?

[ST] Agents and editors didn't ask me why I was writing white characters. I was not aware that I could write non-white characters till I encountered Courtney Milan and Jeannie Lin. As someone who was neither Black nor white, but who had mostly read white authors, and Rosemary Rogers was my example... Historical romance was so white that more of it did not really matter. And again, this is where not actually being born Chinese American comes in. Because I wasn't looking to find myself in this literature. It was entertainment. Because I was not only fluent but also literate in Chinese and grew up reading books all about Chinese people. So I didn't lack this. I didn't feel like I needed to see myself in this.

And also, as a person, I'm just not very interested in putting my own experience in my books. Books have always been an escape. I don't want to see myself in there. If I saw myself in there, it would not work as escape. I wanted to see myself represented as a woman. And I didn't even think of historical romance as white. I just thought historical romance is English aristocracy. The term "white" did not even cross my mind. My complaint at the time was not that it was white but that it just became so geographically constricted. Because when Rosemary Rogers was writing her romances, lots of them were taking place in America, in Europe –in France during the Napoleonic War, not England– in Mexico during the Revolution. She had a book that started in Sri Lanka.

[JK] Is that how *MBE* came about? Was it part of addressing that complaint? It has a biracial protagonist and large sections of the plot are in Asia. And does it echo your identity in any way?

[ST] *MBE* was not specifically addressing that. I first wrote the story of *MBE* not as a romance but as a "big book," a historical novel with a martial arts element. I queried it and everyone loved the query letter but no one wanted to see the manuscript. So I did not know what to do with it, till I had finished the Fitzhugh trilogy and I was thinking of leaving historical romance entirely because I had run out of ideas. But my agent suggested I try to do one more contract; I had the draft of *Luckiest Lady* so I sent that and Berkley offered to take it and one more historical romance. Once I completed *Luckiest Lady*, I thought about what I could submit as that second historical romance without having to start from scratch and *MBE* was the only thing that was left.

But it was in the vein of a lot of martial art epics that I read growing up. These novels were often a coming-of-age story starting with the childhood of the protagonist, such as the fiction of Louis Cha. [Cha was a best-selling author and his works have been adapted for the screen.]

Accordingly, the events of what would later be the duology of *THB* and *MBE* were all together in the first draft as interwoven/dual timelines. My

critique partner had given me a lot of feedback on it in the past, too, and I had just put it aside because it had felt overwhelming.

Now I separated the two parts of that big book and sent Berkley the adult romance of Ying-ying and Leighton. Then I beefed up the remaining YA story, which was initially just about Ying-ying, by adding the sections on Leighton's youth and made it novel length. And I also did this because I did not know if the market would support it. I think there was a time in the past five years when this book, if it had come out more recently, would have done a lot better. But at that time in 2013, the market would not support it. It has always been my worst selling title. And the reason that I also did *MBE* as my last [historical romance] was because I did not have to worry about how the sales would reflect on my future books anymore. So I thought, "Let's blow this taco stand." But it has always been a great personal favorite.

[JK] And mine. I had seen movies like *Crouching Tiger* and imagined the action in *MBE* happening in the places I had seen in them. I romanticized the spaces in it. And *MBE* expanded, for me at least, the historical romance genre in a way that had not been done in a long time. It was such a constrained geography. But I wondered if you have ever visited any of them.

[ST] No! And the thing is, I also read them as romanticized spaces, because in those Chinese martial art epics, they mention the Heavenly mountains and places like that, and just the name –Heavenly mountains! You can't help but be carried away by it, and it is one of the most beautiful places in the world. But no, I've never been there. But the Great Game– I never romanticized what life was like in those places.[7] They were territories being fought over.

[JK] I understand. I did read it in that way as well. The feuding, the conflict between the existing and dying Empire and all the regional governors that were out there; it was just fascinating to get access to that. So much of historical romance had become kind of anemic. It wasn't doing anything new or interesting. It had drained itself of any historical content at that point. It was just repeating the same old stuff. So I definitely enjoyed that part. As a follow up—why did you self-publish *THB* while Berkley published *MBE*?

[ST] I did not have a contract for *THB* and I could not contract it to someone else since it was not a stand-alone –it was meant to be the lead-up to *MBE*. So it seemed best to self-publish it. A lot of people were also self-publishing at the time.

[JK] What made Wendy McCurdy, at Berkley Penguin, take on *MBE* when she did? Did she have any concerns about *MBE*'s biracial protagonist? How did the novel do in terms of sales?

[ST] Ying-ying was always what she was. Wendy did not express any reservations about the biracial heroine. She is bi-racial herself. Publishers were losing

[7] The Great Game refers to espionage operations run by Western and other powers trying to make inroads into China and South Asia].

romance authors to indie publishing and really wanted to keep the ones they had. Berkley liked my traditional historical romance, *Luckiest Lady*, and perhaps that made Wendy take on *MBE* as well. It has always been my lowest seller though.

[JK] Hopefully, there's some kind of revival at some point. But it's good to know that the editor didn't have any questions or concerns. So maybe at least that indicates that we were in a different timeframe, because I'm also doing a history of BIPOC romance, and a lot of those authors from the early 1980s were told by editors to make their characters white. So that's helpful to know that at least, maybe some of that didn't happen in your case.

[ST] No, it did not. I did not get push back. But Berkley did not distribute *MBE* through Walmart –as it did *Luckiest Lady*– and I don't know if it was the premise. But you know, I had had to leave Bantam because, out of my first four historical romances, *NQH*, even with white protagonists and publishing support, had poor sales and cost the later books Walmart distribution. *NQH*'s low sales suggested that books set elsewhere, even if they were about white people –never mind other people *and* set elsewhere – would not do well at Walmart.

So I left Bantam and Berkley signed me. It wasn't a lot of money but they said they would get me back to mass merchandisers –which they did with *Luckiest Lady*, but we lost it with *MBE*. They said it was because of some kind of shakeup at Anderson distribution, which was the company that does all the actual distribution to mass merchandisers; but I'm not sure whether that's an excuse, and they just didn't want to carry it, because it was not a book that would sell greatly at Walmart (going by *NQH*, for example.)

Before I left Bantam, they did offer to reintroduce me as a debut author under a different name and get Walmart/mass merchandizing. I decided not to, because abandoning a pen name after just four books felt premature.

[JK] So they didn't directly say this to you, but it sounds like some of the books that have a biracial component or were outside of the UK setting...

[ST] Oh yeah, that was one of the reasons. And you can fault editors for asking writers to make changes, but editors pay attention to the market. And if the market is not buying, and authors want to make some money making a living doing this? They can either take a risk self-publishing or they can do what is more likely to get them a wider audience. This is what Jane of *Dear Author* [a romance blog] said a long time ago; she said she was hoping to see more diverse books with self-publishing, but that ended up not being the case. Because without traditional publishing as gatekeeping, there's still the audience gatekeeping. There's still the readership, general readership.

[JK] Yes, for sure. And as I'm writing the history of some of the early work of BIPOC romance, I'm being careful not to put the blame on editors. I'm more interested in figuring out, how do people maneuver within that structure? To what extent do they put in things that they really want, without completely dropping out of the game, because you're not really accomplishing anything, financially or otherwise, if you just refuse to engage. That's partly why *MBE*

is fascinating to me, because I think it does so many interesting things, but it's useful to know what some of that context is, and the fact that Bantam wanted you to use a different name in that offer they made you. And since you mentioned *NQH* again: that came out in 2009, years before *MBE*, and was also set in Asia. What prompted this plot and setting?

[ST] I had watched *The Painted Veil* (2006), with Edward Norton and Naomi Watts.[8] It felt like a movie someone could make of a Laura Kinsale novel but then it ended tragically, which I did not know about when I went to see the movie. I was shell-shocked. I wanted to re-write the story. But I did not want to set it in China so I looked into the history of other colonized countries and learned about the Battle/Siege of Malakand in 1897. So *NHQ* came about because I watched this movie and could not leave that tragic ending alone. You know, I always laugh when people say my books are gut-wrenching but I write fairy tales. I'm giving you a happy ending. It's not gut-wrenching for nothing!

[JK] Does your heritage as Asian American (and as someone who has a multi-cultural/ethnic family) play a role even when writing non-Asian/American characters/stories? Or when writing Asians?

[ST] Yes. Even before I came to the US, my life in China involved difference. My family was from the south but we lived in the north. My grandparents spoke Mandarin and it was intimidating to my friends who spoke the local dialect (though not because my grandparents spoke Mandarin but because their Mandarin was so heavily accented). I also have an early memory of being laughed at for not knowing how yeasted/fermented breads were made. (The staple food in my home was rice.) So I was always an outsider from the beginning and that "outsiderness" is a theme in my work. Being an immigrant [to another country] heightens that experience, such as in terms of accent, culture, behaviors, etc. The religiosity and racism in the US was most striking to me, as was encountering ideas like creationism. In China, atheism is enforced by the authorities, which is also warped, but the cultural divide within the US feels more vast. The US's cultural isolation from the rest of the world also felt striking when I first came here.

This awareness is present in my work. Lady Sherlock has some outsiders, people who do not fully belong to the mainstream. Ingram is half-Jewish, Charlotte and her sister are on the neuro- divergence spectrum, Mrs. Watson is pan sexual. In a sense, I'm always looking for diverse characters in the cast. *The Librarians* has much more diversity compared to the Victorian UK! Both main protagonists of the romance plot have Asian ancestry and are

[8] *The Painted Veil* is based on Somerset Maugham's novel of the same name. A British doctor posted in Hong Kong—Shanghai in the movie adaptation—weds a British socialite but the marriage soon seems like a mistake when she has an affair. Then he takes her with him to a remote region in the interior to tackle a cholera epidemic; the high-stakes situation draws them closer. Unlike a romance novel, the story ends tragically.

wealthy, trilingual, well-traveled. [I interjected here to ask if *Crazy, Rich Asians* (2013) was an inspiration.] No, I haven't read it. But I wanted to write broader Asian representation. There are a lot of good-looking Asians who are not as visible in this media landscape. This limited representation is possibly because prior migrants were not from elite classes.

But since I do not want characters to be very close to my own experience, Hazel is Singaporean, and along with her love interest, part of the Asian diaspora. Also, in the initial planning stages, I had thought to make one character wealthy, just in case the book might be the first in a series about this library staffer and librarians are under paid; it was decided that it would be a stand-alone, however, which was why I wrapped up all the threads by the end.

The main protagonists in "Prima" are part of an Asia-Pacific flotilla on this alternate Earth. Some of their family backstories, especially of the main male character, draw on the "palace intrigue" web novel sub-genre.[9] The cultural differences between the two main characters' countries in "Prima" [one is more progressive regarding gender roles] shows two aspects of some Eastern cultures. Women in the Tang dynasty (Seventh-Ninth century CE) had the most freedom (such as in apparel) and some of those elements are in this novella; as dynasties in China became weaker, however, there were more restrictions on women, which is the case with the man's family and country. I was also thinking about Afghanistan and the situation of women there as I was writing about the women characters.[10]

Ying-ying [in THB and MBE], if I think about it, is the product of two cultures and various conflicting but equally important influences, and she is –and I have heard people like me also referred to as– a third-culture kid; we grew up somewhere and then we grew up somewhere else. That is most like the outsider experience, of the outsider who is looking for a place. All my protagonists are outsiders in some way but she is the most obvious outsider in that sense.

[JK] That reminds me of another *MBE* question: Is the cave that houses the sculptures in the final section of the plot similarly based on specific eras in Chinese history? Where did the idea for the Buddhist sutras and the attacks on Buddhist monks come from? Are you alluding to Mongol incursions?[11]

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[9] These are usually long online stories that readers can access on dedicated sites; some are free, some are part of subscription-based platforms. They take place in court/aristocratic settings and the plots have Asian protagonists.

[10] A key thread in the novella's plot is that the male character, Ren, also termed Prince Nineteen, helps his mother and sister escape their patriarchal country for that of the heroine, Lady Sun, which is led by a council of women.

[11] The novel charts Ying-ying and her foster father's search for what is initially assumed to be a cache of a hidden/lost treasure. But it is actually a cave of Buddhist scripture carved into stone, an archive created by Buddhist monks when their way of life appeared to be under threat.

[ST] No, it is not about the Mongols; they invaded during the Song dynasty (Tenth-Twelfth century CE), which follows the Tang. There was a decline in Buddhist influence during the Tang period, though it had become very popular in China earlier. The issue was that Buddhist temples were not taxed, which might have been seen as a problem internally (by the government). Buddhist monasteries were supported by lay people and the monks were not part of the economy –as workers or taxpayers. Since it was a loss of revenue, it led to occasional crackdowns by the government. One of my sources for these attacks was "Four Buddhist Persecutions in China" on Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation 2025). [I interjected here to ask, "and the cave of scripture/sculpture?"] There was a video that inspired the cave in *MBE*.[12]

[JK] You have written many different genres. What leads you to switch?

[ST] I am a working writer and while it is a great position to be in, I don't have a book that has broken out and made so much money that I can just write whatever I want. So I follow my artistic impulse but work with an eye on the marketplace. I wrote YA paranormal fantasy after my agent received a query about whether I might want to write a YA novel. YA was on the tail end of a hot streak in the industry [post-2010] and there was editorial interest, at least when the novel was acquisitioned. I wrote the manuscript for Elemental book 1 "on spec" because the query came again and my agent took it to auction. I worked on the series with Donna Bray at Harper Children's Balzer and Bray. But the series did not really do much in terms of sales.

My Mulan book [*The Magnolia Sword*] was another editorial ask. When I got that query, I decided to do it even though it was the lowest advance I had been offered. It seemed like the conversation regarding diversity was changing. I was slowly starting to gain a bit of consciousness [around race.] I had written so many white characters that I decided it was time to do an own-voices book.[13]

[I interjected to note that *MBE* already had some diversity since Ying-ying was biracial.] Yes, but she's only one character and half-English, half-Chinese. This book would be wholly Chinese from top to bottom.

I wrote *The Librarians* after being solicited to write it as well (and I never ask, "why me?") and it's my most diverse book. I hope there is a market for it. One of the main characters, the romance plot's heroine, is of Singaporean heritage and is a descendant of the couple in *MBE*. I had recently re-read *MBE* and became obsessed with it again for a week. I decided then that

[12] As noted above, I have written elsewhere of *MBE*'s China setting (and how it represents the waves of diverse people who lived there). I suggest that the novel's references to a history of attacks on monks and their attempts to preserve their ideas allude to the contemporary persecution of the Uyghur people and are a rejection of the idea of a monolithic Han past devoid of other ethnic and religious components (*Creating Identity* 186-88).

[13] "Own voices" is a term for work done by artists of color about characters who share their ethnicity or artists who share their characters' other minoritized identities.

Ying-ying and Leighton eventually settled in Singapore because it was a place where you could be both Chinese and English, and it was politically not turbulent. There is a throwaway line in *The Librarians* that one of Hazel's ancestors was an Atwood [i.e., *MBE*'s Ying-ying, who married her English lover, Leighton Atwood, at the end of that novel in 1891].

[I interjected to share that readers who are fans of *MBE* often get excited when Leighton shows up in the Lady Sherlock series in his missions as a British intelligence agent.]

I have a hope that one day Catherine Blade [Ying-ying] will make an appearance in the Lady Sherlock books but that story arc has unfolded so slowly –eight books and the timeline has only moved one year– we need to get out of the 1880s [since Ying-ying only comes to England in 1891]!

Writing the Lady Sherlock mysteries was a rare instance of an artistic decision. I had read *Beekeeper's Apprentice* around 2006 [a fanfic/reimagining of an aging Sherlock Holmes who teaches teen Mary Russell to be a detective] and thought a female Sherlock would be interesting. But I did not think of myself as a strong plotter then and since I had just started in historical romance, I thought I should continue that for a while. But the idea came back when the Cumberbatch/Freeman *Sherlock* was on the BBC (2010-2017). I was completing my last historical romance project around 2013 and I had run out of ideas for more, like I said. Historical romance authors were leaving traditional publishing for independent publishing because it was more lucrative and publishers were desperate to retain people who would write for them. Since I had already written a mystery in the Elemental series (*Perilous Sea*), I pitched the Lady Sherlock mysteries and Berkley gave me a three-book contract. So yeah, mostly I'm asked to do stuff, which I like a lot!

[JK] Can you share other industry assessment/memories? What about your interactions with other authors? What is the current state of the industry, including shifts into indie/self-publishing/Kickstarter publishing, such as the post-apocalyptic/"bunker romance" anthology *After the End: A Dystopian Romance Collection*?

[ST] My memories are of pleasant interactions. I've led Romance Writers of America workshops on craft at national conferences and online. I continue to do so with disaffiliated groups. I occasionally also teach classes for the Writers League of Texas (Austin).

Independent publishing is best for folks who like to manage every aspect of the process and are industrious. It is also for people who are data-minded and want to experiment with the options indie publishing offers. It's not my strength or inclination. Now it's more expensive to do self-publishing, too. In the past, costs were minimal to writers (just attending Romance Writers of America conferences maybe). I do have exclusive rights to British Commonwealth countries for the Lady Sherlock series and I do my own ebooks for those. The US publisher only has exclusive rights for it in North America and there is no UK publisher. *After the End: A Dystopian Romance*

Collection, which has my story "Prima," was mostly handled by Adriana Herrera and others.

[JK] How did this collection come about?

[ST] In August 2024, Ali Hazelwood reached out to ask if I would join a dystopian romance project. I liked the miscellaneous contributions. There was a group call with the other writers and we did some brainstorming around the concept of bunkers. I wasn't sure about it and countered with the idea of a "sea bunker" [an isolated ocean setting]. We discussed options for different framing devices or a common apocalypse background for all the stories but I wrote the first chapter of mine without a "first cause." I only came up with the idea of a fungus that ravaged the planet later. Just around that time, I was on a cruise to Singapore and Sydney; being there and knowing there were diverse members in the Kickstarter project made me decide to set the novella in that hemisphere.

I initially thought to put it in the South China Sea and then changed my mind and set it in the Luzon sea, by Taiwan and the Philippines, instead. The amnesia idea came to me after that. I had used amnesia a couple of times before: in *Tempting the Bride*, amnesia was how I introduced a new conflict between the couple; but my favorite magical amnesia story is the second novel, *The Perilous Sea*, in the Elemental series. I returned to that technique in "Prima." Amnesia, memory loss, and grief asks: who are you without your memories? It's about having to learn that again.

[JK] You play with time while doing that, and in increasingly complex ways, using other literary artifacts.

[ST] In playing with time, I want to reveal information at the moment it has most impact. [In "Prima," the story is doled out in present-day scenes interspersed with flashbacks from a decade ago, and includes a graphic novel that one protagonist creates that, unbeknownst to him, is drawing on his subconscious/erased memories of that previous time.]

The graphic novel in "Prima" was a way for the romance hero, Ren, to open his soul to Lady Sun. I was using the panels in his graphic novel like photos. In the novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000), the opening and closing snippets are photos of what is lost, as is [the use of other memory aids in] the movie *Memento*. The story structure mixes different elements of narrative and they all come together at the end.

[JK] What's next? For you and for romance?

[ST] My readers want more historical romance but it is "deep winter" for that. Some of my earlier historical romances might be reprinted in trade soon. I'm contracted for more Lady Sherlock books but I have rebooted my local romance writers group and I have some ideas for other books that mix genres and draw on themes found commonly in Asian romance. Stay tuned.

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