

Humanities Center Forum – Part 2

Yiyun Li

Audience member: [Inaudible]

Yiyun Li: Do you have (a topsy? a topic?) Do you have a body today? And if they do have a body and they've -- I guess the body agreed to donate some sort of cells we would walk with, you know, liquid nitrogen to get the cells from people's vocal fold. The second thing we always do is we always call the slaughter house and say do you have, you know, sheep today or cow today or pets today. And the third thing actually very surprising is every -- every week there was the -- there was the one scientist who would do the open heart surgery on dogs. And after he did surgery on dogs I would go in and cut the vocal folds of the dogs. And this what I can tell you about human being, the difference between human being and animals. So we human beings we have four layers of tissues in our vocal chords and that's why we have voice. Animals don't have voice. Animals only have one layer of tissue. So dogs always bark. You know, the sheep always bah. What's interesting is babies, before they turn one, they only have one layer. So babies don't have voice either and the babies can't lie. If they are hungry, they are hungry. If they're tired, they cry. So it's very interesting.

So I think that's to me is very interesting is that when you have more layers here you can start to make voice, and with that voice you can lie. Because when women lie they tend to lower their voice. Do you hear -- do you know that? You don't know that? Well, you can go home and test on people. I used to do this to my students. I said, "Well, go home and ask your roommate to tell a lie, and then tell one lie and one true statement." When women tell a forced statement women tend to lower their voice and men tend to raise their voice, the pitch. That's the voice lying. And that is interesting thing is I notice that only because I speak English all the time now and I also speak Chinese to my husband. He notices that when I speak English my pitch is much higher. And I asked my students, you know, fluent Spanish speakers, but English native speakers, they all confirm that they actually want to speak Spanish their pitch gets higher. So it's not a common, it's just -- I don't know, it's just blabber about what you just said. I love that babies don't have a voice. And maybe we need a voice to lie.

Audience member: How did you get your first book published?

Yiyun Li: How did I get my first book published? I had -- well, I think in a way I was very fortunate and I had a very strange experience that I -- I -- I wrote a little bit a night I turn out -- I got a story into the same -- the same year I got one story my first story was accepted by Paris Review and my second story was accepted by The New Yorker. And that's the only thing I had, and I signed two books deals based on those two stories. So how did I get my first book published? Because I had a book contract I had to write it. [Laughter]. I was already paid, so I started to writing. That's very boring isn't it?

Audience member: People don't just lie to others they lie to themselves. So -- but when [inaudible question]. This what makes human psychology interesting [inaudible].

Yiyun Li: I do. I love -- you know, of course the most interesting lies are the lies you tell yourself. You did just mention there's a [inaudible] if you lie to yourself. What lie did you tell yourself today?

Audience Member: [Inaudible answer]. [Laughter].

Yiyun Li: I love that. That's very good. I was buying donuts the other day -- actually, I did not -- I do not eat donuts. My children love donuts so I was buying donuts, and there was another man buying donuts. We both looked at each other. We were both very embarrassed. So I said -- I actually told the truth--I said, they're not for me, they're for my children. And he said, "The economy is so bad, I feel I need some donuts." Well, I do -- yes, I do think people lie to -- that's -- I think that's even more interesting because, in a way, when you write about people's self-deception you are cornering them. Because, again, they would not -- I mean, if you lie to another person you would not want to admit it, but if you lie to yourself, even the conscious or unconscious. you would want to know it. So I think writing to me is interesting as you can be so -- you cannot do this in real world. You cannot do these nasty things to real people, but you can always do those to your characters. It's that you just not allow them a moment of, I don't know, peace. You just keep pushing them. Let me see if I can find an example in the book about self-deception. This one story..let me see. Sorry. There's one story about a -- the first story of the collection about this woman who never married and -- and she lived alone and she never admitted she loved anyone. She would not let love come into her world. She would not let friendship come into her world. She lived in a completely isolated, you know, emotional world. And -- and she would convince herself that it's good for her, that's exactly what she needed. But as a writer, I guess you have to push her and you have to find one crack. People always crack. There's always some sort of crack, you have to find one crack and the crack I found in her was at one moment of the story she said, "I have never forgotten a single person who has come into my life." Well, if you don't like people you don't say that. That's the -- that's the moment of truth she told me. I think I sort of--you have to--work with that. Yeah, sorry. That's not a very good answer.

Audience member: How do you push your characters? How do you [Inaudible]?

Yiyun Li: Yes. How do you push your characters? You know, I -- if your character is a quiet person, you have to put her into a position that she has to talk to people. If your character is a talkative person, you have to shut him up. [Laughter]. You know, in a way it's very interesting because I -- when I work on my novel, there was one character in my novel who just could not shut up and he was the funniest person ever. And when he talked he was on stage. But he took over the novel because every time he came it became easy for me to write because he just could not shut up. So my character -- so what I did was I just -- I did not allow him to talk. I will always put him into a position that people did not respond to him. Even that, he could talk for ten minutes by himself. He could talk to a tree for ten minutes. So in a way you just did not -- you would not -- you would put him into a position that he would be talking to a tree for ten minutes without getting any response. And that sort of, you know, was how you push your character. You know, you just don't allow. Never give -- I mean, every character wants something from life. And you always have for each of the characters you always have one thing they want you don't give them. If they want attention you don't give -- you don't allow them to have attention. If they want quiet -- if they want solitude, no, don't give them solitude. Put them in a marketplace and have people pushed onto them. Does that make sense? I mean, that's sort of -- that's very vague, I know. In a way I think -- I mean, it's the same as real life, you know, we never get what we want, right? You want this, but life gets you something else. It's always interesting when you get something you don't want and you have to deal with it. Or you want something really, really very much and you never get it and that desire is very interesting. So sort of just work with that a little.

Audience member: [Inaudible question].

Yiyun Li: Can you say that first part again? I did not hear the first --

Audience member: [Inaudible question.]

Yiyun Li: Sociopaths, sociopaths. Oh, I do have one. I think I have one sociopath in my novel. Not only raped a body and who mutilated a body too. I don't know. I've actually I -- I mean, when I say I don't know, I really don't know. Sorry. I think I need to -- I need to -- I need to think about it. Well, what do you think?

Audience member: I don't know. [Laughter].

Yiyun Li: What do you think of the statement of, you know, my characters are oftentimes very --

Audience member: [Inaudible response].

Yiyun Li: Right. That's very true, too. Well, I would say, you know, when I was in grad school so funny there was this writer, very famous writer that I cannot -- I cannot absolutely name her because she's -- she's probably one of the top writers in this country. And she came to grad school and she said, well, I'll tell you guys there are three kind of characters you should not write. First, you should not write children characters. You know, you should not write about children. Second, you should not write about, you know, people who are addicted, like who are drunk or are drug addicts. And third, you should not write about crazy people. And we had this lovely visitor from England, and when he heard that he said, oh, my goodness she just successfully erased half of the Russian literature. [Laughter]. So I always remember her, but I think, you know, I don't know yeah so that's not a question -- an answer to your question at all. I'm sorry. Yes.

Audience member: All this talk about lying...[inaudible].

Yiyun Li: I would partially agree.

Audience member: [Inaudible].

Yiyun Li: I wouldn't say I lie in my writing. I make up things in my writing, because I'm a fiction writer.

Audience member: [Inaudible question].

Yiyun Li: Writers lie to tell truths. Actually, I would -- you know, I think it's probably true, only very limited and partially, I would say. How do I convince you? I don't know. Okay. You can help me out.

Audience member: [Inaudible].

Yiyun Li: Oh, perfect. Perfect. I'm so happy you --

Audience member: [Inaudible] difference between fiction and lies because it's about the intent. Intent of a lie is to genuinely deceive. Fiction is not intended to be deceptive. I read your story. I think it's a true story. I think it's an interesting story. I think so the difference in a lie and a fictional story is about intent. So a book can be a lie [inaudible].

Yiyun Li: James Frey. Oh, okay.

Audience member: So this is actually a lie.

Yiyun Li: Yeah, that's a very good point.

Audience member: [Inaudible] Whereas your novels are not intentionally excessive....[inaudible]

Yiyun Li: Thank you very much. I need to remember everything you said next time someone asks me I can answer a question. Can I go to someone behind you and then come back to you. Yes.

Audience member: Well, I was going to say instead of [inaudible].

Yiyun Li: Oh, you know --

Audience member: [Inaudible]. [Laughter].

Yiyun Li: I'm a big starrer. I stare at people. I can stare at people all the time. And if someone doesn't meet your eyes it's always, you know, suspicious. And their voices, I think when people talk -- I don't know, I think their voices tell a lot. I mean, this is -- this is totally gossipy, but a few years ago I applied for a job, and before I went there I had a sense that they actually cancelled the job search. And nobody told me, but I think the administrative assistant accidentally made a phone call to me and said -- I mean, it was two hours before I got on the airplane. She said, actually we actually don't know yet if we want you to come or not. And she was the only one who said something. And then ten minutes later she called me; she said actually just come, just come. And I -- so I knew there was something wrong. And I went in and all these people who interviewed me pretended they did not know anything. And so how do you know when someone is lying? When I met the department chair I knew he was lying, right? So I stared at him for 30 minutes, and he was so uncomfortable. You could see he just wanted to kick me out of his office. That's the thing, if you suspect people are lying to you, you just sort of -- you don't let them go, you don't -- you know, you don't let them off the hook. I think I would never be invited to -- back to that school for anything because I made a huge enemy with this man. But I just stared at him. Because I was so mad.

Audience member: One of your first stories called "Extra"....[Inaudible].

Yiyun Li: Yes, one of the first ones.

Audience member: [Inaudible question].

Yiyun Li: Yes, so my "inspiration." That's a very good question. So "Extra" is the first story in my first collection. It's about this older woman who never married and who was laid off from a state-owned factory so she could not make a living. And she was match made to become somebody's caretaker. So she was match made to a man dying, so she could take care of him in exchange for food and -- and a place to live. And then later she went to a private -- the first private schools in Beijing -- to become a maid. The inspiration, it's very funny, because my mother actually worked for the first private school in Beijing. My mother was a schoolteacher. And before she retired-- this was in the early 1990's and private schools just started to show up in China. All the rich people -- the super-rich people -- would send their children to private schools. My mother worked in this school. It was a boarding school for kids and I always remember, one day she came back she said, you cannot believe what happened in school. She said this little boy, six year old, he stole a little girl's socks and he put the socks on his hand and he

rubbed his cheeks with the socks. And my mother was elated because everybody that school was elated when they caught this boy. I just could never get that image out of my head, you know, a little boy with a sock and rubbing his cheek, and I just thought there was something really lonely about that image. So that story actually started with that image of the rubbing. But again, you know, I have to make up something else so I thought every -- and this is what's 1990's in China, I mean, this poor boy was considered, you know, something was wrong with him. But I just thought someone must think differently. Someone who would look, you know, say no this is not -- there's nothing wrong with this boy. There's something wrong with the world. So that woman was the woman who became the main character because she thought it was not the boy's problem, it was the world's problem when this boy was abandoned. And you know he was abandoned by his family. They just -- they didn't want to deal with him so they send him to a private school. So that's where the --

Audience member: [Inaudible question].

Yiyun Li: Yes. Yes. I don't watch TV, but my characters watch TV all the time. [Laughter].

Audience member: [Inaudible question].

Yiyun Li: I think mostly, you sort of know where the story is going and -- but you never know the whole thing. You have to write it out. In a way I think the reason you want to write a story is, at least for me, there's something that I don't understand about this person. You know, I write about what baffles me. And so if a character really baffles me, I write about him, but that doesn't mean I know his stories. The only way I can know him is to write the story out to get closer to him. So it's always -- you know, you always have to unfold it when you write it. I mean, if you know the story from the beginning to the end, if you know everything, you're going to be bored., I would be bored if I already knew everything, so I would not want to write that story. Oh, there's a hand out there.

Audience member: [Inaudible question].

Yiyun Li: Oh, that a young woman who wanted to poison her father...

Audience member: [Inaudible].

Yiyun Li: Oh. No, I didn't -- I didn't really mean there was not enough hatred in this country. There's probably more than enough hatred in this country. I guess what I mean is for that character I wouldn't call that hatred, because hatred makes something very simple. I mean, hatred is black and white. And anything black and white -- I don't believe in black and white so I -- I guess I correcting myself I said no that's not hatred because I think it's something more complicated.

Audience member: [Inaudible].

Yiyun Li: I was thinking [inaudible] gosh I always get asked this question; someday, someone would come back and ask that question. Have I lied today? I lied to Sara. I said, "Oh, it's a wonderful drive here." [Laughter]. Okay. Two hours. I'm so polite. I drove from Oakland here today and when Sara asked me, "How was the drive?", I said, "Oh it's wonderful." Two and a half hours into the drive I called my husband and I said, I finally saw a sign that says "Chico," so it meant I'm very close now.

Audience member: And it was still another 40 miles.

Yiyun Li: It was exactly 40 miles away. Sorry, so I did lie. Thank you very much. I think we should end on that note.