Spotlight *Asian teens in America*

Andrew Fukuda's debut novel, *Crossing*, was inspired by the disillusioned Asian teenagers he met working as a volunteer counsellor in New York's Chinatown. He tells **Charlotte Middlehurst** about the Asians who never found the American dream

Nowadays, Andrew Fukuda is a successful New York-based lawyer – but before law school and the sunny streets of Long Island, Fukuda says he felt like 'an odd duck in the world' due in part to his nomadic upbringing. Having been born in New York to a Japanese father and a Chinese mother, Fukuda, now 38, had lived in 25 places by the time he was 25, with the longest stint in Hong Kong.

At 24, his own sense of dislocation – and a desire to explore his Chinese heritage – led him to volunteer to counsel troubled teens in New York's Chinatown. 'When I began to work with the teens, I really responded to something about them,' he says. 'That sense of being dislocated; strangers in a strange land. Just as a nomad instinctively feels more comfortable with a fellow nomad, the Chinatown teenagers did so with me.'

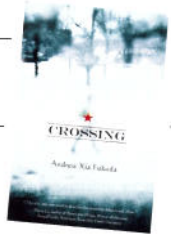
The two-year experience inspired him to write *Crossing*, his debut novel, which tells the story of Xing, a Chinese immigrant teen growing up in an all-white town, whose lonely existence is interrupted by a series of mysterious disappearances at school. The book – which was shortlisted as debut book of the year both on Amazon.com and in *Booklist* magazine – is a heart-rending tale of loneliness and longing, with a thrilling whodunnit in the background.

The book is a damning indictment against peddlers of the 'American dream', which he says went sour for most of the Asian teens he met in New York. 'They felt America had cheated them,' he says. 'Instead of finding the America they saw in Hollywood, they walked around embittered.'

> 'For people born with a silver spoon in their mouths, Amy Chua's methodology works a lot better'

So who is to blame? According to Fukuda, the struggle for acceptance is fed as much by immigrant myth-making as it is by host-country hostility. 'There is a sense that life in America is golden – if you go there success will be yours – and I think it's perpetuated by the immigrants themselves,' he says.

According to Fukuda, this disillusionment is rooted in the home as well as the world beyond. In *Crossing*, Xing's mother barely speaks to him.



When she does, once a week on a Sunday night, she rat-a-tat-tats the same tired line: 'Education is everything, education is everything.'

'This is very typical of what we see in immigrant families, where parents aren't around because of their jobs, often working long hard hours,' says Fukuda. 'They come with the expectation that their children will do well academically, that being successful at school is the golden ticket. This is fine if the kid is self-driven and intelligent, and in that case the "tiger" mom and father are raising their kid perfectly.'

Fukuda is referring to the recent furore surrounding self-confessed 'tiger' mom, Amy Chua, whose book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, sent shockwaves throughout the Asian-American community this year. Chua advocates a strict 'Chinese' parenting method with a severe focus on education.

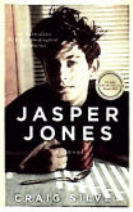
Fukuda says: 'For people born with a silver spoon in their mouths, Amy Chua's methodology works a lot better. You have a parent who is largely able to be at home and supervise, with the money to afford piano lessons and private tutoring. But where those resources are lacking and you have parents and children who can't speak English, you're going to have all kinds of problems.'

Fukuda does point out, though, that the notion of the American dream is a fading one. 'The allure of America is diminishing. China is now seen as a rising superpower and so much of what you can have in the West is available back home.' This may be true, but for the young people grappling with life in Chinatown, it is of little consequence.

Andrew Fukuda speaks at the Shanghai International Literary Festival on Saturday 5. See listings for details.

Review

Jasper Jones
Craig Silvey



★★★★★
Allen & Unwin
70RMB

Jasper Jones is the brilliant second novel from Craig Silvey, an Australian writer who published his award-winning debut, *Rhubarb*, aged just 22. The story follows Charlie, a bookish 13-year-old in a Western Australian town in 1965, who's woken one night by Jasper Jones, the town's alluring but misunderstood outcast. Spurred by adoration for his idol, Charlie is taken to a clearing where Jasper's girlfriend is hanging from a tree. With Jasper fearing that he'll be framed for murder, he persuades Charlie to help him dispose of the body before the town finds out.

Though the story of the death forms the basis of the book, this is more than a murder mystery – it's a coming-of-age story which takes in young love, dodgy parenting, the Vietnam war and the blind herd mentality of small towns.

None of it feels laboured, though, partly because the book is laugh-out-loud funny and features some of the most likeable characters you'll meet in any novel.

For all its lightness of touch, *Jasper Jones* is a beautifully constructed story, with a zippy plot, some brilliant moments and, ultimately, a genuine emotional punch. This is a book – and a writer – that deserves to be taken seriously. *Toby Skinner*

Craig Silvey speaks at the Shanghai International Literary Festival on Saturday 5. See listings for details.

Books

In conversation *Hong Ying*

Chongqing-born Hong Ying has become one of China's most respected writers, and her stories of marginalised characters have been published in 29 languages. *K: The Art of Love* (2004), was dubbed 'the Chinese *Lady Chatterley's Lover*', winning her the prestigious Rome Prize. Her most recent book is the best-selling 2009 memoir *Good Children of the Flowers*

Why did you write this book?
Good Children of the Flowers is about the relationship between mothers and daughters. I wrote it after losing my mother and shortly after becoming a mother myself. It is also, I realised after I had begun to write it, a book about China and its suffering over the lifetimes of three generations. There has not yet been closure over the Cultural Revolution.

Three of your novels are set in Shanghai. Why this city?
Pre-Liberation Shanghai is a wonderful metaphor for many aspects of life in China. It's where West met East; it was the laboratory for China's modernisation, where the wealthiest and the most creative lived. It's also where my father came from, and it feels like my spiritual home.

Do you feel that you represent minority groups?
I identify with marginalised members of society because for much of my life I have felt marginalised myself. I grew up despised for being illegitimate. When I lived in Britain, I was an outsider. When I returned from Britain, the Chinese government considered me to be a foreigner. My writings are popular with the media and the people but I've never been recognised by the establishment.

Do you view your writing as political?
I am no preacher or politician; my main job is to entertain. Writers who are also activists tend to be more interested in politics than literature. Look at Chen Kaige's recent movie, *Orphan of Zhao*. He's so keen to get a political message across that he's forgotten how to be an artist. *CM*

Hong Ying speaks at the Shanghai International Literary Festival on Sunday 13. See listings for details.