

# The parallel universe

Leonard Chang crosses over to the world of human trafficking, right in his own neighborhood | BY MARTHA VICKERY

A few years ago, about five miles away from Leonard Chang's home in Oakland, California, the cops raided a network of massage parlors in San Francisco, and broke up a huge human trafficking ring which extended into Los Angeles and several other cities.

Chang remembered he was shocked upon hearing that about 100 Korean women, brought into California illegally through Mexico, were working in forced prostitution right in his neighborhood. "I was startled out of my nice, safe, comfortable cocoon in Oakland, and that started me thinking about wanting to write about this subject and these kinds of characters."

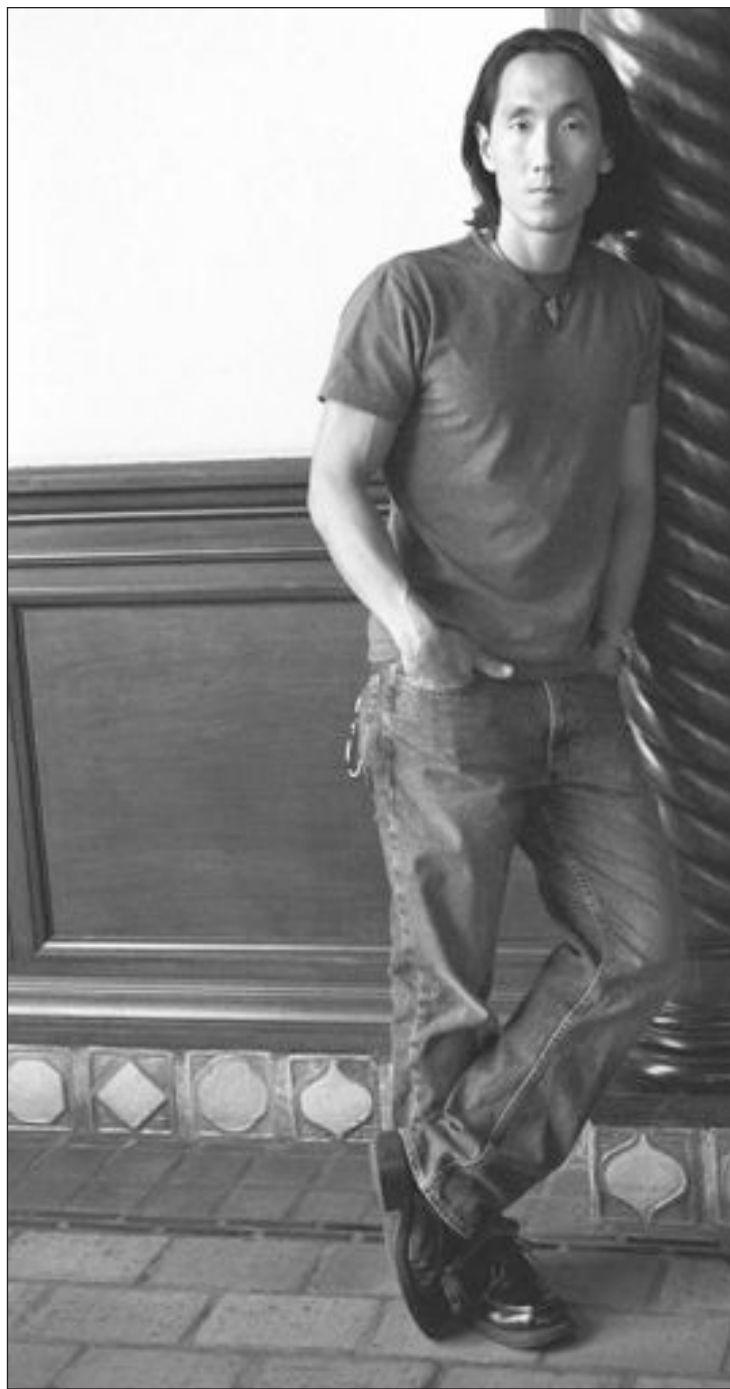
After some intensive research into the human trafficking industry, and after producing his recent novel *Crossings*, the author wondered "if a novel is enough, or is there something more required of me. I don't know. But it definitely changed a lot about what I thought about writing, and its effect on other people."

Chang is a masterful writer of the modern experience; each one of his finely-drawn characters breaks a cultural stereotype of what Korean Americans are supposed to do and be. His trio of detective novels follow the career of a rootless security guard/private eye Alan Choice, an anti-hero of sorts, whose detective adventures also include a journey into his own past. *Dispatches from the Cold*, his second novel, relates what happens when a Korean crime boss moves to town; the story is set in, of all places, New Hampshire.

*Fruit 'N Food*, his first novel, explores personal relationships and race relations between Korean Americans and African Americans in an urban setting.

In *Crossings*, Chang explores a terrifying reality where Korean teens and young adults put themselves at the mercy of a violent and money-hungry system in the faint hope of getting a second chance in a new country. It is a world in which people are bought and sold like used cars, and uncooperative ones are exterminated and quietly thrown away. Once in the system, its victims rarely escape.

"This was important subject matter," he said. "I thought it was my



Leonard Chang

responsibility to be as accurate and as honest as I could about some of the things that are going on. So I actually took time for a lot of research, which included interviews with some of the trafficked women and with some of the authorities and other parties involved."

He made friends with a woman who heads an international non-profit to help escapees of the global human-trafficking industry. Although the bust in his neighborhood involved Koreans, and the characters in *Crossings* are also Koreans, Chang learned that the human trafficking system extends to many countries and has been growing for more than 15 years. Through his contacts, Chang inter-

viewed some of the trafficking victims. He heard stories that were horrible — teen girls forced into prostitution, or working impossible hours for no pay at massage parlors or clubs in order to pay off what they are told is their debt, badly beaten for misbehavior; sometimes disappearing without a trace. "I became a little bit depressed about the issue. Some of these kids — and they are kids 13, 14, or 15 years old — not having a chance for any kind of a life."

As he interviewed some of the women who had been in part of the human trafficking system, Chang said he discovered that most of the women had been completely unprepared for the system of forced labor

or forced prostitution awaiting them. "A lot of the women were just naïve or could not quite fathom what could happen to them," he said. He was permitted access to the women, he said, because he could point to his other novels as evidence that he is a legitimate writer, and promised them that he was writing only for fictional background and that no individual stories would be told. He also had to be very sensitive to the extreme shame and embarrassment the women had in talking about their past, he said.

Many of the women he met were eventually deported, he said, while others were referred to programs designed to help them assimilate into U.S. society.

In the story, at least two people are murdered and simply disappear. Chang heard references to this happening numerous times in the course of his interviews. "People said that somebody was never heard from again, and we hope she got away but what are the chances of that?" he remarked. "I never had any direct evidence of people [being murdered] ...but there were enough stories for me to infer it and then do my job as a fiction writer, to fill in details where a lot of details just weren't there."

In addition to the intense experience of interviewing trafficking victims, Chang said, he was writing every day, trying to get some of their reality into the lives of his characters. "I was trying to understand a lot in an accelerated and focused way," he said. "Actually, it probably wasn't the most healthy way to approach it." The intensity combined with the subject matter was a memorable, but mentally exhausting experience.

If he has written a character well, he said, it is as if he has temporarily become that person. "There is a really close identification you get in writing about the character, in order to make the stories true on the page."

Chang said he often talks about "method acting" when teaching writing to college students, which he has been doing for 13 years. "I tell them you have to understand the character inside out, in the way that an actor might do a lot of prep to talk in an imagined character's voice; a writer has to do the same thing."

In bad writing or novice writing, "you can see the ventriloquist," Chang added. As a writing instructor, Chang said, he repeats this lesson about characterization frequently. Once characters are whole and believable "you can almost let them take over and tell their own stories."

Chang's method is thorough and takes time. "One reason why I can't churn them out, is that I spend a lot of time with the novel, day in and day out," he said. With the researching and rewriting, *Crossings* took four solid years to complete.

The story revolves around two brothers, Sam and Jake, Sam's son David, and his new wife, Yunjin. A peripheral character is Sunny, Sam's first wife, who has died of cancer before the story begins, and whose character appears as memories or ghosts. Because he needs someone to take care of David, Sam asks his family to send him a new wife from Korea. Yunjin, is a biracial Korean/African American..

Although Sam is financially undependable, and is becoming more surly, drunk and jumpy as the story progresses, she moves forward in her new life without regret.

Sam seems like victim of his own poor judgment, while the younger brother Jake is a canny businessman. The crime boss Mr. Oh supplies cheap labor for Jake's restaurant and nightclub in the form of illegal workers. In exchange, Jake carefully launders money through his business; he knows the cash is from massage parlors and other illegal businesses, but wants to know as little as possible about where it is coming from.

Sam is deeply in debt because of Sunny's medical bills, and asks his crime boss to pay them off, then is in debt to him. To repay, he begins to work in Oh's organized crime business.

He meets some of the trafficked women, and befriends one in particular, Unha, who reminds him of Sunny. Determined to save her from her fate, his life spirals out of control, with Yunjin, David and Jake all in harm's way.

Unha's story begins in Korea

with a broken engagement. Her fiancé calls it off because his family wants him to marry a woman with more money. Poor, embarrassed, and trying to find a way to leave town, she unknowingly makes a deal with a trafficker and leaves with a small group of women for Mexico. She ends up working long hours at a nightclub owned by Oh.

Unha also wonders about Minji, one of the girls she traveled with from Korea to California. The story switches to Minji and some of the other young women caught up in the violence and humiliation of massage-parlor prostitution.

Chang returns often in his writings to exploration of family relationships, in this case, between the two brothers Sam and Jake. Siblings are particularly interesting to him, Chang said. “How they are foisted together as family members, not quite friends, but not having the familiar relationships as a parent and child.” In his recent career as a scriptwriter, Chang said, he is writing a story about two brothers. “Writers often find themselves obsessed with certain themes, and issues, and no matter

what we talk about, or write about, the themes percolate up.”

Chang thinks his family was atypical in Korean America; his parents divorced when he was young. Now he and his two siblings are scattered all over the country. “That all has made me really curious about how other families operate and what is it that keeps them together and splits them apart and how it differs from other kinds of relationships.”

In thinking about the book’s larger purpose beyond its existence as a work of fiction, Chang theorized that if he knew nothing about the massage parlors in his neighborhood before they got busted, probably a lot of other people are as clueless as he was. Thus part of the novel’s purpose is truth-telling. The whole idea of the Korean massage parlor “makes some people uneasy,” Chang said. There’s a certain amount of denial in the Korean American community. “People don’t want to acknowledge that these things exist, but they do. They are out there. I felt that it was my responsibility to write about it, and to be as honest as I could be.”

Writing about how ordinary people react to and survive an impossible

situation is also the job of the novelist. “The stories of how the characters are breaking free and striving for something better in their lives — that’s what is not just about Korean Americans,” he said.

Chang said he chose his first publisher, Black Heron Press, over a large commercial publisher because Black Heron has kept the first two novels in print. Fifteen years later, *Fruit ‘N Food* still sells well every year, Chang said. Like *Crossings*, it is a hard book to read, packed into it is a message about race relations in the ‘90s that transcends time. *Crossings* is similar in that it also delivers a message about the high human cost of organized crime. Chang hopes to deliver that message to readers for many years beyond the new crop of books in 2009.

An independent press, Black Heron is not being guided solely by book sales. In contrast, Chang said, “with a lot of commercial publishers, if the book doesn’t sell well within the first six months, they will take it out of print. I’ve dealt with that with the Allen Choice novels and I saw how bottom-line-driven it can be. I made some sacrifices in order to make sure the book would

be out there and stay out there.”

After *Crossings* reaches its dramatic conclusion, Chang did something unexpected. He wrote an epilogue, which reveals information about the short- and long-term future of some of the characters who survive their experiences with organized crime. This epilogue employs content from another, gentler version of the book he wrote as though narrated from David’s perspective. As the author, he “knows” what happens to the other characters, Chang said, and he wanted the reader to also know that there is a glimmer of hope.

“I had to, just for myself,” Chang said. “I feel that the novel as a whole was so sad, enervating and depleting for me, I needed something at the end. ...to help alleviate some of that sadness of the novel. That’s why David came back. I even know in an offhand kind of way that Unha is fine afterward too.”

Really, Chang said, he does not want to be the author of books that nobody would read unless it was assigned for a literature class. As a college professor, he knows that his first two books have been required reading in some classes “and sometimes I have had a sense that no one would read them unless they had to!”

With *Crossings*, Chang knew he was embarking on a project destined not to be fun. Nonetheless, he went in pursuit of his characters’ lives as a way to provide a permanent literary marker of a time and place. The people who are trafficked experience shame and are unlikely to tell their stories; they will either go back to their home country, go on to another job, or disappear. The police busts of massage-parlor rings are big news for a few days, and then are gone into the ether, Chang reflected. “So you wonder how these stories are going to be told; how are they going to be recorded and how are people going to remember? The act of remembering and understanding may prevent it from happening again.” He wanted, at least, for the story to honor the people working in these places, trying to work off their “debt” and hoping for a fighting chance in this country.

He recounted one of his most uplifting experiences in the past year. “I was in a café on Wilshire [Boulevard, Los Angeles], and working on a script, and I looked

across the room and saw someone reading *Crossings!*” Chang was so curious about the reader’s motives, that he had to introduce himself and ask the person why he was reading the book. The answer was somewhat bland — the reader had heard about it, and saw a reference to it in a magazine and was curious.

Upon hearing that answer, Chang said, he felt “a nice sense of relief, that, OK, someone is reading this who doesn’t have to read it, and has not had an assignment to read it for school! He was just curious about it, learning something about it, interested in it,” he related. “That helped me regain something, and get rid of some of the angst that went into writing it.”


Chang has been reflecting often on the larger purpose of fiction in the face of the overwhelming human rights issues and suffering described in *Crossings*. “It’s a much longer process than I ever imagined,” for the purpose of any piece of fiction to be realized, he ventured. “That maybe something I wrote 15 years ago may not be relevant for another 30 years. I can’t really be worried about what effect my writing is having in the here and now, and I just have to do the best I can.”

Concern about the ultimate utility of a work of fiction is, he decided “an egotistical sort of process that I should let go of.” Instead, Chang said, he is trying to “be as good an artist and craftsman as I can, and not worry about the repercussions and ramifications of what I am doing. Because that’s all outside of my control.”

Letting that go has been a big relief. “And so, in an interesting way, it has relaxed me, because I don’t worry so much about my writing or my career.” Recently, he has been having fun with his writing in a way he has not experienced in a long time, doing some scripts for independent films. He might try TV.

After a 20-year career in fiction, the break has been energizing. “I haven’t been this happy in a long time... I’m learning and excited about learning in a way that I haven’t felt in awhile, so it has been really good for me.”

Chang said his present goal is to “to enjoy the process and see where I end up.” He envisions himself back writing novels again “because it is the most free kind of writing I could do, but I am happy to try other forms, at least for the time being.” ●



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