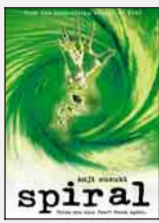


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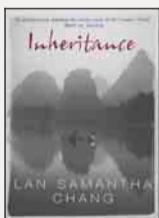
FICTION

Compiled by Charmaine Chan



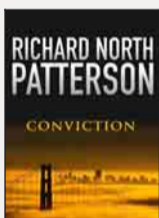
Spiral
by Koji Suzuki
HarperCollins, \$96
★★★★☆

Spiral opens where *Ring* closes. But those who haven't read the book (or seen the movie of the same name) that spawned the hit series will still be spooked by the sequel. While performing a post-mortem on Ryuji – the last victim in *Ring* – Ando discovers a piece of newspaper sticking out of the cadaver's abdomen. The only things on it are two numbers that he later decodes to mean "ring". Those familiar with *Ring* will remember how anyone unfortunate enough to have watched a crackly videotape dies. Ryuji, having succumbed, seems to be directing the pathologist towards the same video, offering further clues about the dead girl whose thoughts are on the recording. Koji Suzuki is more interested "in a meld of science and superstition" than just horror. *The Independent* commented in a favourable review, comparing his characters to those found in Haruki Murakami's work and his plots to those favoured by American horror-meister Stephen King. As for the difference between first and second books, *USA Today* felt the scare factor in *Ring* to be more immediate and visceral.



Inheritance
by Lan Samantha Chang
Phoenix, \$96
★★★★☆

Lan Samantha Chang's first novel, *Inheritance*, may revolve around 20th-century Chinese history, but, as *The Guardian* notes, "her principal concern is the fast changing minutiae of family life and relationships". The multigenerational saga begins in Hangzhou in 1925. Two sisters are left to fend for themselves after their mother chooses to die when her husband tries for a son with another woman. The eldest, Junan, then finds her father has gambled her away to a Nationalist soldier, Li Ang, with whom she falls in love against her will. When the Japanese invade, he's dispatched to Chongqing, where Junan will join him after she's given birth to their second child. In her stead, she sends her shy sister Yanan. And the two fall in love. *The New York Times* summed up the spare but affecting novel thus: "Love, enmity and mutual need serve both to bind the two sisters and to force them apart." *Asian Pages* concluded that *Inheritance* is "beautifully written and searingly honest about love, loyalty and the price that must be paid for it".



Conviction
by Richard North Patterson
Pan, \$101
★★★★☆

It's almost with reluctance that readers judged *Conviction* to be one of Richard North Patterson's weaker works. The consensus is that he's concentrated more on the message than on the medium in his crusade against the death penalty. The platform he builds rests on the case of two brothers sentenced to death for the killing 15 years ago of a nine-year-old Cambodian girl, who choked to death on semen. Fifty-nine days before Rennell Price is to die by lethal injection, he has yet another lawyer assess his case. Teresa Paget determines that he wasn't given a fair trial and that he's innocent. But even when his brother confesses that Rennell had nothing to do with the murder – and that someone else was culpable – Rennell's end seems certain. *The Independent* was less than generous in its description of *Conviction*, with the reviewer admitting he didn't care what happened in the end – "but I imagine you can guess". *The Washington Post*, however, had this to say: "It's high stakes and low drama played out in a middle-brow arena – blue state values served up red-meat style, hold the purple prose."

NON-FICTION

Compiled by Tim Cribb



Daring Judi
by John Miller
Orion, \$144
★★★★☆

On stage, television and film, Judi Dench has had a remarkable career, including an Oscar for her Queen Elizabeth in *Shakespeare in Love*, and it's one that's unlikely to end any time soon. On the occasion of her 70th birthday last year, biographer John Miller compiled a selection of tributes. In this mostly male cast of 18 contributors are stage director Trevor Nunn, playwright David Hare and actor Bill Nighy musing on what it is about Dench that makes her special to them. Perhaps she had a different effect on women, a number of whom one might have expected to have something to say about being absent from this work. Her effect on men is clear enough. Billy Connolly, who played John Brown to her Queen Victoria, says: "I know she fancies me". And adds: "The mention of her name creates a lovely little party in my heart." Next year, Dench will be among the many great British acting names taking part in the Royal Shakespeare Company's year-long celebration of the Bard from April.



Midnight in Some Burning Town
by Christian Jennings
Cassell, \$128
★★★★☆

Subtitled "British Special Forces Operations from Belgrade to Baghdad", this is one of those gung-ho books long on detail, but woefully short on critical analysis or insight. *Midnight in Some Burning Town* is a slap on the back for those brothers in arms who are being replaced by targeted weapons of remote destruction and private contractors. Christian Jennings wields the military jargon as if he were one of them. The attention to weaponry verges on the obsessive. The detail on people being machine-gunned to death is disturbing. And describing a belt of machine-gun ammunition as being like "a bronze anaconda" is, well, something for Freud. Jennings' previous book, *Across the River: Rwanda, Burundi and the Heart of Darkness*, was considered by one critic as "a candidate for the worst book ever published". The blurb identifies him as "a foreign correspondent covering military interventions", and cites former employers as *Reuters* and *The Economist*. One sometimes still hears his ilk at the main bar of the FCC. Apparently it still impresses the chicks. But, hey, if you like guns, you'll love this book.



Louis XVIII
by Philip Mansel
John Murray, \$145
★★★★☆

Restoration of the French monarchy was Britain's preferred option after the exile of Napoleon Bonaparte to Elba. Louis XVIII's return was interrupted by Napoleon's escape that led to the Battle of Waterloo, but the restoration proceeded and, for a decade, France played a central role in bringing the European nations together. Louis, who had pressed his elder brother, Louis XVI, to take the monarchy on a more liberal course, escaped the revolution, serving briefly as regent until the death in prison of his 10-year-old nephew, on which the crown passed to him. Philip Mansel first published this study in 1981 and went on to cement a reputation for what critics called a scholarship "both profound and original". He says in a new introduction to this paperback reissue that the advances of the European Union make timely a revisit to the problems encountered by Louis. In his time, Mansel says, "Europe almost gained an institutional framework". Much mourned on his death in 1824, his reign was hailed as "one of the most glorious in the history of France".

In an extraordinary memoir, Theary Seng recounts how she survived the horror of Pol Pot's genocide, and went on to confront – and forgive – her persecutors. She tells **Tim Bryan** what it means to be alive

Evil's smiling face

THEARY SENG HAS been busy of late. During her recent book promotion tour to Britain she conducted some 30 interviews in six days – surprising attention, perhaps, given her memoir of a distant time and alien land.

But this is no ordinary memoir, as the title, *Daughter of the Killing Fields*, attests. It details a life shaped by the Khmer Rouge's barbaric plan to return Cambodia to the Year Zero and rid the society of anyone tainted by modernity – the educated, rich or urban.

Seng was from a landowning family, and her mother and father – a soldier on the losing side – were among the 1.7 million killed as the Khmer Rouge dragged Cambodia through one of the 20th century's worst genocides. She endured labour camps and forced marches during four years before finally escaping in 1979 across the mine-strewn Thai border to a refugee camp, and then to a new life in the US. Settling in California with her brothers, she eventually won a place at Washington's Georgetown University, to study law. Now 34, she lives in Phnom Penh.

Seng feels she is a product of the Killing Fields of 1975-1979, a period of suffering that ended only with the Vietnamese invasion. "I'm very much a product of living under the Khmer Rouge genocide – in particular, the atrocities witnessed and experienced at Bung Rei prison. I was greatly distraught, angry and depressed growing up. The US provided a safe place for me to heal, but I still had to heal, and that requires encountering one's demons and past."

After moving back to Cambodia, she got the chance to confront one of her worst demons: Khieu Samphan, the man she says murdered her parents. The Khmer Rouge head of state was known as Brother No 5 in the Pol Pot regime.

"The hour I spent with Samphan was one of the most surreal events of my life," Seng wrote of the meeting. "Instead of revulsion, a perverse sense of awe initially captured my emotions – for evil was not mad, but charming, gracious and grandfatherly."

"He was my height or a bit taller, smooth-skinned, fair and well-built – more stocky than average Cambodian men. I pressed my palms together to greet him in the customary Khmer manner."

The meeting in Pailin, northwest Cambodia, was fraught, but mannered, like a meeting of lawyers. Despite his denials of any responsibility for the genocide, Seng says she felt no anger towards him. "In trying to understand that person, it helps to meet them," she says. "I didn't hesitate when offered the chance. I wanted him to see me not as a little girl, vulnerable and his former prisoner, but as



asia specific

someone who had suffered deeply at his hands but was now free of his hold – that I now had moral authority over him.

"One of the benefits of confronting someone like Khieu Samphan is the realisation that these individuals were once human – that no one is born a killer of one or a million people, that killers are made, that life is full of choices, however difficult they may be, that we are ultimately responsible for our choices."

Did she forgive him? "The healing process requires forgiveness. As a Christian,

I'm required to forgive as I have been forgiven. That's not to say that such individuals shouldn't be tried in the court of law."

That seems a long way off. "I believe Cambodians are resigned to the inevitability that a legitimate trial will not happen," Seng told one newspaper. "A UN-backed tribunal may take place, but we are fooling ourselves if we think justice or collective closure will be had. I don't believe the tribunal itself will bring about personal healing. That takes place in the quietness of one's soul."

Seng says she wishes "that we Cambodians had a greater sense of disgust at the crimes perpetrated on us by other Cambodians; we should shun them and treat them as pariahs".

She talks of the Stockholm syndrome, in which the captive comes to sympathise with the captor. "We have an exaggerated and overwhelming sense of gratitude and obsequiousness that inclines us towards this syndrome, especially in a time of great turmoil and cruelty. Growing up, I had both these sentiments which I detested in myself, but I nonetheless engaged in it."

Obviously, writing the story has not been easy. "Logistically, it was difficult trying to piece together my history and that of my family. My older brothers and relatives helped immensely to piece things together, but making them speak of certain, specific events or elicit certain facts was trying. They were more concerned with the spirit of the account."

"Emotionally, too, it was difficult. Emotions I thought had been under control came flooding out. Certain passages, I wrote with tear-streamed eyes, in particular the account of our arrest, my brother Lundi's reaction, the passing of my great-grandmother, our long walk to prison, my

last night with my mum, recounting my grandmother Yi Hao's life and sacrifices, trying to put myself in her shoes and realising how far short I was of measuring up to her strength and determination."

Her motive was to "provide a more complete story of our past, for my family and future generations, as a bridge to the past, as a means to show the younger generation their parents' sacrifices, for them to not take things for granted."

"I had the most wonderful conversation in London with a Khmer-British man, a leader of the Cambodian community who had been sent my book. He called to tell me he knew my parents – he is a friend of my uncle – and had lived in Svay Rieng province, where my relatives grew up. He said he views my story as his story. If another Khmer or non-Khmer finds comfort, resonance, or understanding, I will be immensely gratified."

A recurrent theme in *Daughter of the Killing Fields* is Seng's belief that "life is but a breath". To survive is just a matter of breathing. "It doesn't take extra energy to breathe, to just exist. But to live well and with health, when we're no longer just reacting or surviving, that requires energy and strength and consciousness and love and care and support."

Now a committed Christian, Seng works as a legal consultant in Cambodia. "I pursued education not because I wanted to pursue the American dream of material wealth but because I wanted to understand myself and my past. I'm back in Cambodia because I feel compelled to be here again, as a citizen. Before, I lived in Cambodia as a prisoner. Now, I'm living here out of choice, and on my own terms."

Daughter of the Killing Fields by Theary C. Seng (Fusion Press, \$232)



Theary Seng's (top) *Daughter of the Killing Fields* includes an account of her confrontation with Pol Pot's Brother No 5 Khieu Samphan (above). Photo: Reuters

chinese characters

Writers from China's diaspora

Michelle Wan

A lifelong devotee of mystery novels, Michelle Wan remembers the precise moment that she turned from reader to writer.

"My husband and I were staying in the Dordogne in southwestern France," she says. "Walking down a forest path, my husband suddenly pointed to something in the grass and said, 'My god! It's an orchid!'" Wan's husband, Tim Johnson, is a tropical horticulturist, so he knows a thing or two about wildflowers and orchids.

Realising there were wild orchids everywhere, the couple snapped photos of every one they spotted on their walk. "The problem was that, when the prints were developed and we sat down to identify what we had, we couldn't remember where we'd found them. And habitat is an important clue to identification. But we did know the sequence of the photos, which helped us to reconstruct the locations. There was also a pigeon house in one photo that served as a marker.

"It occurred to me that

this could be the plot of a great murder mystery."

Wan, 61, began writing *Deadly Slipper* with no expectation of being published. She had a full-time job as a research consultant for a drug addiction programme in Guelph, Ontario, her home for the past 30 years.

"But I've been a scribbler all my life, and I thought, 'I want to write something that I'd enjoy reading'. It wasn't easy because, once I started, it meant getting up two or three hours early for three years to squeeze in a bit of writing before going off to work. Sheer determination got me through."

It's not the first time Wan has prevailed against the odds. She was born during an air raid. "When the Japanese were bombing Kunming during the second world war, my mother was on the operating table. The medical team attending her had to leave because of the air raid sirens. When they came back after the all-clear, there I was."

With her mother, her brother and sister, Wan soon left China for India. Five years later, the family headed for the



US. Her mother and her maternal grandfather, whose parents were from Fujian, had both been born in the US.

Wan's parents met on a ship travelling to China. She was heading for university in Nanking; he had just graduated from the San Antonio Air Force Academy and was returning home to his Beijing banking family. "It was a shipboard romance," Wan says. "My father joined the nationalist government air force, acting as a liaison with the American

volunteer Flying Tigers." Perhaps because her childhood was spent moving from one country to another – and later "moving around the States a lot" – Wan has always been a traveller. After graduating with a BA from Stanford University, she lived in Britain, before settling in Guelph, where she obtained a masters in geography (with a focus on China's economic geography). Her career then took her all over the world, from Southeast Asia to Brazil

and Zimbabwe. Although Wan's only trip back to China since leaving as a baby was in 1976, the country fascinates her. "I find myself sometimes struggling to understand the China we're looking at today," she says. "Not that it's foreign to me, but it's so big and developing so quickly. I'm looking at it and my mouth is ajar."

Wan says she may one day write her mother's story, but for now the characters she created in *Deadly Slipper* – the first of a planned series of murder mysteries set in the Dordogne – have taken on lives of their own. A second book, *The Orchid Shroud*, is due out next year. "The plan is to have a series with the orchid theme that goes well beyond two books," she says.

Will her characters ever leave the French countryside? "Well, China and Southeast Asia have a huge number of orchids. Orchids are extremely widespread. They're a bit like the Chinese, don't you think?" *Stella Dong*

■ *Deadly Slipper* reviewed, Page 6