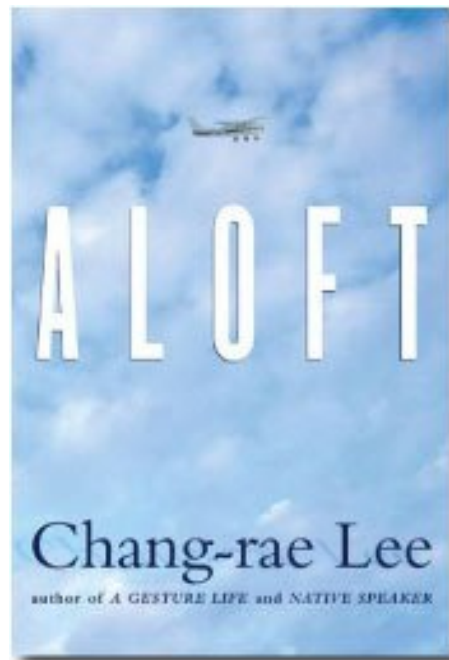
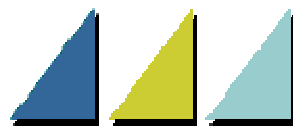


# Long Island Reads 2008 Reader's Guide



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LONG ISLAND READS

## About Chang-rae Lee

"I'm fascinated by people who find themselves in positions of alienation or some kind of cultural dissonance," says creative writing professor and novelist Chang-rae Lee of his literary creations. "The characters may not always be Asian Americans, but they will always be people who are thinking about the culture and how they fit or don't fit into it."

Lee would certainly be in a good position to understand the outsider's perspective. At age three, he immigrated to the United States from Korea. That experience of crossing a great cultural divide haunts his fiction, which typically explores themes of identity and assimilation.

These themes have clearly struck a chord with readers and critics. *Native Speaker*, his debut novel about a Korean-American outsider who becomes involved in espionage, garnered numerous awards, including the Ernest Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and the American Book Award. Lee was later named one of the 20 best American writers by *The New Yorker* magazine for his second novel, *A Gesture Life*, the tale of a medic who recalls the experience of treating Korean "comfort women" during World War II.

Practicing the craft of fiction is only one of Lee's passions. Described as an "infectiously enthusiastic teacher," Lee enjoys helping students find their own literary voices in his role as professor of creative writing in the University Center for the Creative and Performing Arts.

And yet, Lee admits, he didn't initially plan to be a teacher. "I kind of fell into it," he recalls. After college, he attended the University of Oregon on a fellowship with the hope of writing a novel. The fellowship included a teaching requirement, and eventually he was asked to join the faculty. "Even though I had signed a book contract, I thought maybe I would try teaching. Then it just sort of kept on going."

Teaching, he says, offers its own unique challenges, completely separate from the task of writing the perfect paragraph. "When you're a teacher, you're thinking about your students' work and wondering about their concerns," he explains. "When you're a writer, you're just completely focused on your own imagination. It is difficult sometimes to mix the two, as they are different activities entirely."

For Lee, helping students learn more about literary craft has its own rewards. "What I've enjoyed over the years is how excited I get when I come across students who are just at the cusp of doing something really fine," he says. "It reminds me of when I was starting out and trying to figure things out. The consciousness that the students display at that moment is very exciting to see."\*

## **About Long Island Reads** *One Island, One Book*

**One Book** projects are community-wide reading programs. The first **One Book** project was initiated by the Washington Center for the Book in 1998. Since then, the concept has spread across the United States and around the world. Seattle librarian, Nancy Pearl, author of *Book Lust* and *More Book Lust*, and NPR book critic, is the mastermind behind the **One City, One Book** phenomenon. If your city is interested in starting its own program, you can obtain “How To” information by going to Seattle Reads ([www.spl.org](http://www.spl.org)).

To see a listing of **One City, One Book** projects visit the Library of Congress website at [www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html](http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html). Projects are listed by state, city and author. While at the Library of Congress site, check out their Center for the Book.

Other sites of interest include:

All America Reads [www.allamericareads.org](http://www.allamericareads.org)

The Big Read-National Endowment for the Arts [www.artsmidwest.org](http://www.artsmidwest.org)

The **Long Island Reads** Committee is a group of librarians and library employees from Nassau and Suffolk counties on Long Island, New York who volunteer to work on this Island-wide reading initiative. Each spring people in Nassau and Suffolk read the same book, participate in discussions of the selection, and enjoy related events in public libraries.

The program takes place in April; many events take place during  
**National Library Week, April 13-19, 2008.**

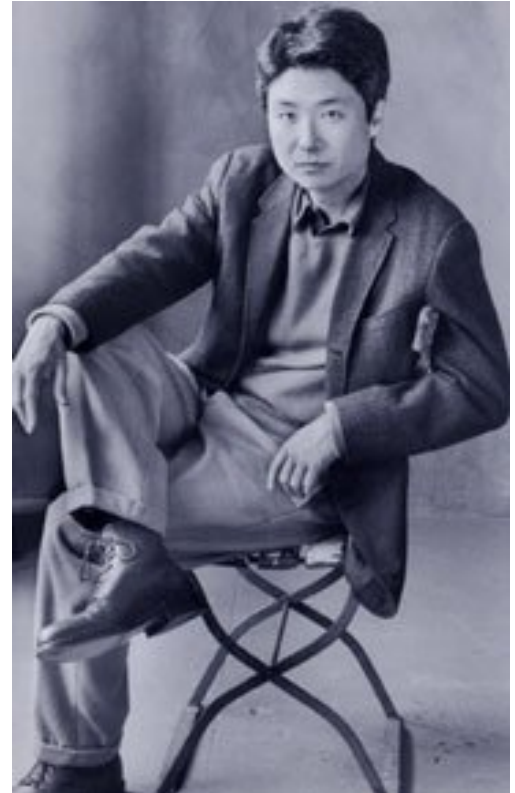
**For more information about Long Island Reads  
One Island, One Book visit:**

[www.longislandreads.org](http://www.longislandreads.org)

## Biography of Chang-rae Lee

A native of Seoul, Korea, Chang-rae Lee was born July 29, 1965 and immigrated to the U.S. with his parents when he was just three years old. He's been fascinated with his adopted country ever since. Mr. Lee received his B.A. in English from Yale University in 1987 and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from University of Oregon in 1993.

In 1995, his breakout first novel, *Native Speaker*, was a critical success on both sides of the Atlantic. In *Native Speaker*, a detective story about much more than crime, Detective Henry Park grows too attached to those he investigates as he discovers the connection between broad social questions and his personal failings. Critics responded, and Lee's debut received a string of recognition, including a Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and the American Book Award. In addition, two literary cornerstones, *The New Yorker* and *Granta*, named him one of the twenty best American writers under forty. For his efforts, Chang-rae Lee also received the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Award. B & N describes his first book as, "A provocative novel about Korean-American immigrant life and the self-discovery of one man, Henry Park, set against the turbulent background of New York City politics and ethnic tensions; a serious, masterful, and wholly innovative twist on first-generation American fiction."



In 1999, Lee's second novel, *A Gesture Life* continued the themes of identity and assimilation. It was originally about the experience of a Korean "comfort woman," forced to sexually service invading Japanese soldiers. To gather information, Lee traveled to Korea and interviewed surviving comfort women, but the novel only found its voice when one of the minor characters, captured Lee's imagination and wouldn't let go. After two years of researching and writing, Lee abandoned everything he had written except for one character: Doc Hata. Franklin "Doc" Hata is a reserved, older physician, Korean by birth, raised in Japan, and now living in New York City. Only after much needling by his daughter, Doc Hata begins to reveal his painful secrets: his time as a medic in the Japanese army during World War II, his love for one of the Korean comfort women, and the guilt that has kept him silent for most of his life. It's an unforgettable story, and *The New York Times* called the book "... a work of astonishing psychological acuity and compassion." In his third novel, *Aloft*, Lee continues to explore the American dream. As *The New Yorker* reflects, "The prose Chang-rae Lee writes is elliptical, riddling, poetic and beautifully made."

Lee currently lives in Princeton, New Jersey with his wife and two daughters, and teaches at Princeton University. He serves as the director of Princeton's Program in Creative Writing, but is on sabbatical to serve as writer-in-residence at Punahoa School in Honolulu, Hawaii. His upcoming novel *The Surrendered* is scheduled for release in April, 2008.

## Interviews with the Author

### ***Only Connect\****

By Isabella Pereira

**Chang-rae Lee is the winner of a host of literary awards and one of the *New Yorker's* twenty best writers under forty. His third novel, *Aloft*, is a soaring tale of love, family and the mysteries of suburban life, and has been acclaimed as both “subtle and tender” (*Guardian*) and “beautifully written” (*Sunday Times*). It is also, the author tells us here, his most personal story to date...**

Family. Can't live with them, but can you possibly live without them? It's a question that author Chang-rae Lee has never stopped asking, right from his acclaimed first novel, *Native Speaker*, published when he was only 29, to his newest book, *Aloft*, published this July by Bloomsbury.

Lee's first two novels explored the repercussions of family life through the stories of narrators at the fringes of American life — a Korean-American private detective in New York in *Native Speaker*, and a Japanese-American veteran of the Second World War in *A Gesture Life*. But in *Aloft*, the author has his gaze trained upon suburbia, telling the story of a charismatic but careless family man who has spent a lifetime putting every possible kind of distance between himself and his nearest and dearest. Elegantly written, poetic and completely absorbing, *Aloft* features a character as flawed and fascinating as any from the imagination of John Updike or Richard Ford — writers whom Lee has admired, and is now delighted to find himself bracketed with.

Lee is in London for the second time in his life to promote *Aloft*. From the bare biographical details, he seems to have little in common with the man he has spent the last four years writing about. Born in South Korea, he moved to America with his parents when he was three. He was educated at a boys' school — reminiscent of that portrayed in Tobias Wolff's recent novel *Old School* — where he was “part of the literati,” then studied at Yale. There was a brief brush with a ‘regular job’ on Wall Street but he then quit to face the challenge of being a full-time writer.

In contrast, the hero of his new book, middle-aged semi-retired landscaper Jerry Battle, has reaped the best of what his immigrant parents had sown, and lives a comfortable all-American lifestyle. He is so at ease in his own skin that his college-educated daughter, Teresa, goes so far as to condemn him (affectionately) as the “last white man.” The author's immigrant upbringing and cosmopolitan education seem about a million miles from Jerry's blue-collar world. But appearances aren't what they seem, and it is evident, that the gentle, observant, self-deprecating Lee and his novel's very charming protagonist in fact have a fair share in common.

Jerry Battle, our narrator, at is the heart of *Aloft*. His story begins on his fifty-sixth birthday, as he makes a solo flight in his private plane — flying high enough, he hopes, to leave behind a confusing mess of family relationships. After over twenty years, his longtime girlfriend Rita has left him, infuriated by his refusal to make her any more than “almost stepmother” to his children, whose Korean mother died when they were small. But this is by no means Jerry’s only problem — his father is trying to flee his retirement home, his yuppie son is slowly running the family business into the ground, and his daughter has a secret that could frankly break a father’s heart. All in all, a family at crisis point.

But why does a writer from a Korean background want to tell the story of such a regular American guy? And how? Writing *Aloft*, Lee says, he was dissecting anxieties that extend well beyond cultural boundaries, first of all thinking about his parents, now in their sixties who had “so many questions and worries about what they were going to do” as they approached retirement. Reflecting on his parents’ dilemma, he had wanted to write about a man at a crossroads of family life, “sandwiched between an ailing father and adult children, and just on the cusp of retirement.”

**“Writing this book was really the first time I felt I was writing about my present time worries and my present time life”**

But most of all, the author was drawing on his own anxieties for family dramas in the novel: “As a novelist there are enduring ideas you want to write about — love, death, passion, guilt — and, yes, you end up writing about those things. But with young children myself, I was embroiled in the business of family life. So writing this book was really the first time I felt I was writing about my present time worries and my present time life.” Lee enjoyed the wallowing in a different kind of consciousness: “So often I’ve been in the outsider’s position — as a person and as a writer — so, this time, it was fun to take the other side.”

The idea for the novel was triggered by a flight he took in his father-in-law’s plane, and accordingly, the novel opens with Jerry “half a mile above the Earth” in his “nifty little Skyhawk, banking her back into the sun.” It’s a beautiful opening scene. “What you read in the first three pages of *Aloft* is exactly what I saw on that trip” he says of it. “And that’s where I had the idea for the metaphor for Jerry’s engagement and disengagement with life. From up there he can see all the fetching details of the world - survey it, appreciate it — but not have to be so knee deep in it.”

Jerry is squarely middle class, or so it seems, and as far as he is concerned, he *belongs*. This notion is a source of fascination to Lee, as Jerry is the first of his characters to feel such security in his position in the world. It’s a rare novel about contemporary American life can ignore matters of class and race, but *Aloft* tackles these subjects with more than the usual degree of empathy. Jerry’s status has left him alienated from his working-class father, who built up the business he has inherited, and also from his upwardly-mobile son Jack and daughter Teresa, an academic. Lee is compelled to draw comparisons with his own family,

and the difference between the life of his immigrant parents and his own life as a writer: an unthinkable career in Korean culture. “It’s not just that we’re different generations, but also we grow up in different worlds,” he explains. “Jerry is upwardly mobile, a striver — and his daughter Teresa is cynical; an intellectual. Yet, because of her opportunities, Teresa has the imagination to see a different future for herself, which Jerry cannot.”

But Jerry’s position allows Lee to make him an everyman: “Jerry has working class origins, but upper class children: he can straddle all classes, and in some cases speak their languages.” Indeed, the detailed, eloquent rendering of Jerry’s consciousness is a remarkable feature of the novel, one in which we can hear not only the author’s acknowledged debt to Joyce, but a complete absorption in the character, rendering all of Jerry’s musings — from ordinary thoughts to his most profound hopes and fears.

This democratic approach has won the author all kinds of fans, including the author’s air conditioning contractor who thanked him for not making Jerry “a dope.” Lee expands: “Everybody from professionals to landscapers thinks about love and death. And often in poetic ways. It’s my job as a novelist to articulate the soaring of that consciousness. It’s the soul you are hearing in *Aloft*, not really the person.”

**“It’s a much easier life to be detached from real issues, but when you connect with people, that’s when it gets interesting”**

Where his relationships with his children and his father are concerned, Jerry has more than his share of both pleasure and pain. Does Lee see inter-generational strife as inevitable? “Well 99.9% of the time, that’s the case,” he says, with a rueful grin. “That’s the way we all are — we’re constant disappointments to each other, not just because of what we do, but of what’s expected of us. If you love someone, you think they’re perfect. And inevitably you’re going to be disappointed.” It’s a preoccupation from both the Korean and American part the writer’s experience. He admits: “my stories are focused on family life but it’s because we are — as immigrants we’re taught to take care of our own — to put our own house in order first.”

But families in Lee’s novels relate to each other by pulling away from each other — and love is never quite expressed but often replaced by a painful emotional distancing. “In this new millennial life, we don’t so much communicate as leave messages for each other,” Jerry says to himself, and he embodies the practice: difficult, but charming; endearing, yet frustrating to practically everyone around him. *Why do we find it so hard to talk to one another?*

This is a subject on which Lee is impassioned: “in the modern world we use every means of communication except the obvious ones,” he says “we’ve come up with lots of ways to virtually communicate but we just haven’t mastered the basics.” At the start of *Aloft* Jerry tells his daughter that perhaps they shouldn’t bother talking because they just aren’t very good at it. If this sounds more than familiar, Lee sees it as a problem we should address urgently: “We *should* bother with each other. It’s a much easier life to be detached from real issues, but when you connect with people that is when it gets interesting. Of course, it also gets more complicated and dangerous.”

Not quite forty, it will be a while before the author approaches Jerry's middle years. But what is he expecting to find there? "A mastery of perspective and consciousness. Wisdom. That's what we get from our decrepitude," he laughs. "There really are things on the other side of the ledger that make life sweet enough to live." And who could question such gentle optimism?

### **Becoming a writer: Chang-rae Lee's advice to aspiring writers...**

- "Feed and nurture your talent. If you have a little talent, don't neglect it and work hard, because if you do neglect it you may find it's a beast that turns on you."
- "Don't be afraid to take risks. Sometimes you can make yourself do something that really shows you something about yourself. Writers often need to make sacrifices."

\*This interview is taken from the Bloomsbury website

<http://www.bloomsbury.com/Authors/microsite.asp?id=663&section=1&aid=1104>

## ***New Faculty Member Gets Novel Welcome to Princeton\****

By Jennifer Greenstein Altmann

Princeton NJ -- When novelist Chang-rae Lee arrived at Princeton this summer as a professor in the Council of the Humanities and the Program in Creative Writing, he received quite a greeting. Hundreds of people in the Princeton community were reading his novel *Native Speaker*, which was selected as the first book in a program that encourages members of a community to read the same book at the same time.

Lee is delighted that his new hometown has embraced his work as the first selection of the Princeton Reads program. "Princeton seems in some ways the ideal situation" for the program because of the town's small size, said Lee. Readers can participate in discussion groups, and they will get the chance to hear Lee talk about the book and answer their questions at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 23, at Princeton High School's auditorium.

A native of Korea, Lee immigrated to the United States at the age of 3. His writings explore the themes of identity, belonging and assimilation. *Native Speaker*, his first novel, tells the story of a Korean-American outsider who is involved with espionage. The book won the Ernest Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, the American Book Award and other honors. It was one of two finalists chosen for a proposed reading program in New York City that was later disbanded.

His second book, *A Gesture Life*, is a narrative about an elderly medic who treated Korean "comfort women" during World War II. The novel, which won the Anisfeld-Wolf Prize in Fiction and the Asian-American Literary Award for Fiction, earned Lee a spot on *The New Yorker* magazine's list of the 20 best American writers under 40. *A Gesture Life* was chosen as the fifth book in Seattle's reading program.

Before coming to Princeton, Lee was professor of English and director of the MFA Program in Creative Writing at Hunter College of the City University of New York and on

the faculty of the University of Oregon. He was at Princeton last fall as an Old Dominion Fellow of the Humanities Council.

Alexander Nehamas, the Edmund Carpenter II Class of 1943 Professor in the Humanities, has described Lee as "one of the most prominent and promising Asian-American authors of this generation." As Lee settled into his new home in Princeton, he talked to the *Princeton Weekly Bulletin* about his approach to teaching writing, what draws him to explore certain stories in his fiction and why he doesn't want to talk about his new novel.

**Are you excited about the Princeton Reads program selecting your book?**

I am excited about that. Princeton seems in some ways the ideal situation because there can be intimate dialogue about the book (between readers and me), and I think in the end what people enjoy is meeting the writer and getting his or her thoughts on the project and what he was considering during its genesis. And of course, the other aspect that's wonderful for me is that I'm new here -- not just to the University but to the town -- so it's wonderful for me and my family.

**Do you enjoy getting feedback from readers on your books?**

I do. It's sometimes shocking, it's always enlightening, and I think one of the things I enjoy most is that I'm reminded of why people read. Sometimes I forget because I'm so focused and not thinking about the real world, but readers' questions always expose how they read and their particular love of reading, which is always fascinating.

**What are some of the most interesting or startling comments you've heard?**

There have been so many -- frankly, I tend to block them out. They all come from such different life experiences and reading experiences. What's fun for me -- it may be because of the kind of books I write and who I am -- is that my work enjoys a fairly diverse audience. You have your typical serious literary reader, but also a lot of newer immigrants read my books, and their reading tradition and experience in English is not always the same as the first kind of reader. Sometimes their reactions are just as compelling as any "literary" reading of the work, and I think that reconnects me to why people read and why it's so valuable to our human experience.

**You've been described as "an infectiously enthusiastic teacher." Tell me what you're like in the classroom.**

I don't really know what I'm like. It's hard for me to say. With my writing students, I tend to let them try to discover what they're passionate about in terms of the writing and the reading, rather than hand over any specific aesthetic or tradition. Someone's personal language is utterly specific, and presumably they're in my class because they have a passion for the language, whether they know it or not. So in class we're not just talking about story and mechanics and how to write a dialogue -- we're also talking about tonality and rhythm, and how the sound of the language is their own story. But you can't give someone a language, a voice. You can only try and tease it out.

**Do you think you can teach writing? Some people don't believe it can be taught.**

You can certainly teach people to write competently. But what I try to do after that is lead them to an artistic approach to the discipline.

**What do you like about teaching?**

What I've enjoyed over the years, and my wife will tell you, is how excited I get when I come across certain students who are just at the cusp of doing something really fine. It reminds me of when I was starting out and trying to figure things out. The consciousness that the students display at that moment is very exciting to see.

Of course, sometimes it's hard because it's a completely different practice from the practice of writing. When I'm a teacher, I'm thinking about their needs and what might stimulate them, and when I'm writing it's completely the opposite. I'm moving to the rhythms of my own world. So in that sense it's sometimes hard (to do both), but I don't think those two things are necessarily opposite or can't work. What I've also realized is that my students need to see me as a writer. If they don't see or sense that, then a lot of the experience is diminished.

**Are you currently at work on a new novel?**

I'm just finishing it up. I probably don't want to talk about it too much.

**Why not?**

Sometimes I think it's bad luck.

**I have heard that you don't like to show your manuscripts to too many people?**

Yes. I'll try to get as much of it done as possible without any input so that it feels wild and pristine, and that way it's completely me. You can always get a lot of feedback at every moment and I think that's sometimes dangerous -- at least for me -- mostly because it's hard to reject a nice idea or a good suggestion, but that suggestion may not ultimately be you, or what the story wants. But after that first big push, then of course I talk to my editor and my wife and friends. But in that first period it's pretty important that it be private.

**Tell me how you work, how you pick your topics and research your novels.**

Each book is very different in terms of how I come to it. With each one you come upon a story and a set of characters that completely fascinates you, which you can't quite get out of your head. It begins a series of endless questions about those characters and situations and the resulting implications. And if I continually have more questions, that's when I feel comfortable and want to write a book. *A Gesture Life* and *Native Speaker* were that way. I had so many questions about what went on in those novels, and in some ways I still do.

**You still think about the characters in those novels, like Henry in *Native Speaker*?**

Mostly only when people ask, but once they do I'm thrust back into his world and the issues still seem personally relevant to me. I think it's because they're still unanswered.

### **Is it easy for you to write?**

For me it's the most difficult thing. I rarely write easily. I could spend the whole day just trying to write a nice paragraph, and other days I write more but the work is no good. It's always a mysterious process.

### **Do you see yourself always writing about Asian Americans, or are there other areas that interest you as well?**

I think I'll write about lots of different people through the course of my career. At the moment I'm fascinated by people who find themselves in positions of alienation or some kind of cultural dissonance. The characters may not always be Asian Americans, but they will always be people who are thinking about the culture and how they fit or don't fit into it. That's one of the notions that I just keep exploring.

\*This interview is taken from the Princeton Weekly Bulletin  
<http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pwb/02/0923/1b.shtml>

## ***Chang-rae Lee\****

"Most people don't think about race as much as I do," Chang-rae Lee says. "They don't have to." As a Korean immigrant whose family took him to America when he was three, Lee's outlook on life has been shaped by a sense of himself as an outsider in a new land. But his childhood was not one of hardship. Lee's father was a practicing psychiatrist and the family lived in an affluent New York suburb. Now aged 38, Lee remains faithful to this upbringing, living a splendidly suburban New Jersey life with his architect wife and two daughters, aged six and three. His passion is golf, which he plays several times a week off a 10 handicap. "I don't feel uncomfortable in America," he says, "but every once in a while I'm reminded that people don't see me the way I see me. It doesn't change my life, but it gives me a consciousness about it."

Lee's first two novels, which were acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic and earned him a place on The New Yorker's list of the 20 best writers under the age of 40, addressed this sense of Asian-American identity. *Native Speaker* (1995) is a Paul Auster-ish detective story about a young Korean-American man who works for a private surveillance agency, and whose life is falling apart. *A Gesture Life* (1999) is narrated by an emotionally scarred Korean exile, and tells the story of his wartime experiences with comfort women. Both books, as one of the characters says of himself in Lee's new novel, *Aloft*, are concerned with "the problem of being Asian and American and thoughtful and male."

Lee is courteous and friendly, dressed on the day we meet in a check shirt and slacks that wouldn't have looked out of place on a golf course. His has been a steady rise to fame. He did not burst on to the New York literary scene, but has received greater literary plaudits with each book he has written. Indeed, the ideas behind *Aloft* have taken nearly a decade to bind together; the narrator, Jerry Battle, is Italian-American, and is loosely based on the author's father-in-law. *Aloft* toys with racial issues - Jerry's first wife, Daisy, comes from Korea, and his children are of mixed race - but this has been

pushed from the centre of the book. In his determination to move beyond the experience of a Korean immigrant, Lee appears, almost self consciously, to be attempting his own "Big American Novel" in the vein of Richard Ford or Jonathan Franzen.

But if it is a critique of suburban life, like John Updike's *Rabbit* novels, *Aloft* is about a different sort of suburb. It is set in the upmarket landscape of Long Island, 50 miles east of New York City, an area that was built in the boom years after the war. "These were the first suburbs that were built on one-acre lots," Lee tells me, "where every man with a decent salary could have a kingdom. It's the first time you could live your entire life - have children, grow old and die - without having much to do with your neighbors."

Lee is concerned about the isolation these suburbs create for the people who live behind their hedges. "We grow up with this idea that we're all individual agents. We work, make our money, have our place to live and our satellite TV. But whether you like it or not you need family or community."

Like Henry Park and Doc Hata, the narrators of Lee's earlier novels, Jerry Battle lives in willful isolation. He is about to turn 60 and, just when life should be settling into a comfortable rhythm, his family starts to disintegrate: his daughter, Theresa, is diagnosed with cancer; his son, Paul, is on the verge of bankruptcy with the family business; his ex-girlfriend, Rita, threatens to marry his old rival Richie; his elderly father, now in a nursing home, vanishes. Jerry's greatest joy is to escape this drama in his Cessna Skyhawk and to fly far above the Long Island suburbs, where none of these emotional tangles can get to him.

"Jerry Battle has made himself an outsider," says Lee. "He thinks he's just like everybody else, but he has a certain kind of kinship with someone like Daisy, who's an outsider." Unlike many of Lee's previous characters, Jerry thinks about race rarely, but it works none the less as a point of tension and difference in the novel. This is apparent particularly in terms of Jerry's relationship with his daughter, Theresa. "She thinks Jerry is the last white man alive," Lee explains. "She sees him as some kind of obsolescent creature from another era."

Lee says the novel took very little research – "it's what I've known all my life, this landscape, this community" – apart, that is, from the flying scenes. The opening pages, in which Jerry cruises solo above Long Island, record the thoughts that went through Lee's head on a "joyride" with his father-in-law. "When I got up in the plane, that's when everything crystallized into an idea. It gave me the metaphor of this fellow's life, his sense of real pleasure and denial at the same time. At that kind of altitude, you can embrace everything, but it's not close enough that you can see any of the tiny details."

Lee began an opening sketch of the novel in late summer, 2001, just weeks before the twin towers were destroyed. "September 11 happened," he says, "and I just stopped writing." When he returned to the book several months later, he considered setting it before the terrorist attacks, but eventually decided to incorporate them into the narrative. "I had faith in the idea that people would want to move on, and I thought, if there's anyone who wouldn't be dealing with such a thing it would be Jerry Battle." It took him about two years to write the book ("very slowly, carefully, revising as I go along,") in between teaching creative writing at Princeton, which occupies two days a week. "My writing days follow my family's day," he says. "I get a good few hours in the mornings

when the kids are out of the house. And I don't work at night any more. I like to see my family."

Lee betrays none of the normal author's angst. He regards writing as just a "regular job." He talks fondly of his wife and children, and of how their needs come first. In many ways the ultimate suburban man, he seeks out the golf course when domestic duties allow.

I ask whether he now sees himself as a Korean or an American writer. He replies that he is an "American novelist," but that this includes being a "Korean writer." "In fact, sometimes, I think being a Korean-American novelist doesn't quite include being an American novelist, which is frustrating..." He laughs, perhaps realizing how self-absorbed he sounds. This man of the suburbs can't seem to shake his Korean past.

## Plot Synopsis\*

*“From up here, a half mile above the Earth, everything looks perfect to me.”* Jerry Battle, *Aloft*

At 59, Jerry Battle is coasting through life. His favorite pastime is flying his small plane high above Long Island. Aloft, he can escape from the troubles that plague his family, neighbors, and loved ones on the ground. But he can't stay in the air forever. Only months before his 60th birthday, a culmination of family crises finally pull Jerry down from his emotionally distant course.

Jerry learns that his family's stability is in jeopardy. His father, Hank, is growing increasingly unhappy in his assisted living facility. His son, Jack, has taken over the family landscaping business but is running it into bankruptcy. His daughter, Theresa, has become pregnant and has been diagnosed with cancer. His longtime girlfriend, Rita, who helped raise his children, has now moved in with another man. And Jerry still has unanswered questions that he must face regarding the circumstances surrounding the death of his late wife.

Since the day his wife died, Jerry has turned avoiding conflict into an art form - the perfect expression being his solitary flights from which he can look down on a world that appears serene and unscathed. From his comfortable distance, he can't see the messy details, let alone begin to confront them. But Jerry is learning that in avoiding conflict, he is also avoiding contact with the people he loves most.

\*Synopsis provided by Penguin Group  
[http://us.penguin.com/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0..0\\_9781594480706.00.html](http://us.penguin.com/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0..0_9781594480706.00.html)

# Critics and *Aloft*

## Reviews

- *American Book Review* v. 26 no. 2 (Jan/Feb 2005)
- *Entertainment Weekly* no. 755 (Mar. 12 2004)
- *Esquire* v. 141 no. 3 (Mar. 2004)
- *New York* v. 37 no. 8 (Mar. 8 2004)
- *The New Leader* v. 87 no. 2 (Mar/Apr 2004)
- *The New York Times Book Review* v. 109 no. 11 (Mar. 14 2004)
- *Time* v. 163 no. 12 (Mar. 22 2004)
- *The Times Literary Supplement* no. 5282 (June 25 2004)

### ***Aloft and Not a Little Aloft: The Impenetrable Chang-rae Lee***\*

By Eleanor Barkhorn

*We include this rather unpolished review, written by a Princeton student, because of its unique perspective on Lee as both a writer and a teacher.*

Chang-rae Lee's third novel, *Aloft*, released earlier this month, is a book of firsts. It is Lee's first book whose protagonist is not Korean-American; *Aloft*'s narrator, Jerry Battle, is a sixty-year old Italian-American. (Lee explained in a telephone interview that he did not consciously choose to write from the point of view of a white man: "The fact that he's white wasn't the original spark. Of course, now that I've created him, I'm going to think about all he is.")

*Aloft* is also the first novel that Lee has published since he joined the faculty of the Princeton Creative Writing Program in 2002. Lee claims that his teaching does not affect his writing. This is an interesting assertion, considering that some of Jerry Battle's statements (when discussing his elderly father's reaction to his girlfriend's stroke, Jerry remarks, "He's definitely being a bit too dispassionate now,") sound as though they could have come out of the mouth of one of Lee's Princeton students. Still, Lee insists, "Teaching and writing are completely different things—opposites."

Lee was born in Seoul, South Korea in 1965. Three years later, Lee, his mother, and his sister Eunei immigrated to the United States, following Lee's father's move the year before. The family settled in New York, and Lee embarked on a path familiar to many Princeton students: he and his family lived in the suburbs (Westchester County); he attended boarding school (Exeter), then an Ivy League college (Yale). After graduating from Yale in 1987, he went to work for an investment banking firm in New York because, he explains, "I didn't want to go to law school or business school."

In his first year after graduation, Lee says, "I kept gravitating toward my computer and writing." So, he did what every Princeton student who has ever taken an upper-level Creative Writing class claims he, too, will do: he left Wall Street to become a writer. Lee

lived in New York for three years after quitting his banking job, working odd jobs and writing until he was admitted to the graduate writing program at the University of Oregon. Lee remained at Oregon as a member of the faculty until 1998, when he returned to New York to become the head of Hunter College's graduate writing program.

Meanwhile, Lee was writing, and publishing, to wide acclaim. In 1999, the *New Yorker* named Lee one of the twenty best writers under forty. At Oregon, he wrote the bulk of his first novel, *Native Speaker*. Published in 1995, *Native Speaker* tells the story of Henry Park, a Korean-American spy. Park, like many of Lee's main characters, feels like an outsider and cannot handle difficult emotions. Park is, as his wife tells him as she is leaving him, "a B+ student at life." *Native Speaker* won the PEN/Hemingway Award and the American Book Award. A year later, Lee published *A Gesture Life*, about an elderly Korean immigrant trying to forget his experiences as an officer in the Japanese army during World War II. Though in some ways a departure from Lee's previous material, *Aloft*, like *Native Speaker* and *A Gesture Life*, details an unemotional man's attempt to deal with emotional crises—in Jerry Battle's case, his wife's death by drowning in their backyard pool, his daughter's terminal illness, his long-time girlfriend's decision to leave him, his son's financial ruin, and his father's escape from an assisted-living home.

As a writer, Lee would seem an obvious role model for his students. After all, he is what many of his students aspire to be: a talented writer who broke out of the golden handcuffs to become a successful novelist. As it turns out, though, Lee is a tricky man to emulate. He does not plan his novels before he writes them. When asked what authors have influenced his writing, Lee replies only that he is reading a new translation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, adding, "It's a grim and beautiful book." He is even more reluctant to discuss his own work. "The more I talk, the more it kind of dispels the magic. I think the mystery is why we read," he says.

Lee does have some advice for his students and other aspiring writers: read. "Young people who are interested in literature should read," he says. He especially recommends that young writers reread books they admire over and over and over to gain clues about what makes a good piece of literature work.

Lee also encourages his students to support published writers. When Russell Banks came to read at 185 Nassau earlier this semester, Lee told his advanced fiction class not only to attend the reading, but also to buy Banks' book. One of the members of the class remembers, "He said something along the lines of, 'You're students. If you don't buy these books, who will? We've got to support our fellow writers.'"

Noticeably, Lee does not urge young writers to take creative writing classes. In fact, considering his extensive experience as both a student and teacher of such classes, he is surprisingly ambivalent about their effectiveness. "They're helpful to people who don't need the help," he says. He calls the writing process "solitary and monastic" and laments the fact that "sometimes, people who should be alone get into writing programs." When asked how he feels about Princeton's creative thesis option, considered by many students the holy grail of the creative writing program, Lee responds: "For certain people it can be good, but sometimes art can be difficult and cruel if you try to make art before you're ready. When I look back to senior year, it's probably good I didn't do it then. I wasn't ready."

Perhaps the most valuable lesson to learn from Lee's example is the value of patience.

Lee admits to rewriting the same sentence up to twelve times before deeming it sufficient and moving on. Unlike many contemporary Ivy League writers (to name a few examples: Nick McDonnel, a sophomore at Harvard who published *Twelve* during his senior year in high school; Travis Muir '05, who just released *Thomasovich*; Jonathan Safran Foer '99, whose bestseller *Everything is Illuminated* started as his Princeton creative thesis), Lee took his time writing his first novel. Compared with McDonnel, Muir, and Foer, Lee was an old man when he published *Native Speaker* at 29. But Lee's slow care paid off; critics remarked that *Native Speaker* is unusually mature for a first novel. As the *New Yorker* review put it, "[*Native Speaker*] takes as its subjects the things that often preoccupy novelists on their first outing—language, family, identity—and it turns them inside out, making literal what is usually only metaphorical." Critics observed a similar sophisticated insightfulness in *A Gesture Life*; according to the *New York Times Magazine*'s Charles McGrath, "*A Gesture Life* reads like someone's fourth or fifth book."

Whatever he may think about their effectiveness, Lee's fiction workshops are among the most structured in Princeton's creative writing program. Each class begins with a discussion of an assigned story from an anthology. Readings for his introductory-level class include Jack London's *To Light a Fire*, Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants*, and Joyce's *Araby*. Then, the students turn their critical attention to their classmates' stories. Lee does not allow the writer to speak while the class discusses his or her work; only after the discussion is over can the writer ask questions of the class.

Finally, Lee himself comments on his students' work. He asks that his students send him their stories a week before the class discusses them so that he can have time to read and respond. Again, Lee's patient deliberateness comes through, as well as his critical insight; he is famous within the program for the thorough, page-long typed comments he produces for each student story. One of Lee's students remarks that he "penetrates a short story to its often-stuttering heart."

But the word students most often use to describe Lee is "laid back." Last spring, two members of his class staged a fight in class to see if they could faze him. One of the "fighters" recounts the event: "Seth lunged across the table and started choking me, and we ended with sobbing apologies and a declaration of love and a hug. Professor Lee just let a beat pass and then said, 'Does anyone else have any comments?'"

\**Nassau Weekly*. March 25, 2004.  
[http://www.nassauweekly.com/view\\_article.php?id=100](http://www.nassauweekly.com/view_article.php?id=100)

# Suggestions for Reading Critically

*Adapted from the Library of Congress Center for the Book Guidelines*

The best stories are those that connect to human experience. They reveal an important truth, or provide a profound sense of kinship between reader and writer. Searching for, identifying, and discussing these truths deepens the reader's appreciation of the story. Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work's value and the discussion potential for your group. Here are some helpful suggestions on how you can become a more critical reader.

- **Make notes and mark pages as you go.** Reading for a book discussion – whether you are the leader or simply a participant – differs somewhat from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book in preparation for a discussion, ask questions of yourself and mark down pages you might want to refer back to. Make notes like, "Is this significant?" or "Why does the author include this?" Making notes as you go slows down your reading but saves you the time of searching out important passages later.
- **Ask tough questions of yourself and the book.** Obviously, asking questions of yourself as you read means you don't know the answer yet, and sometimes you never will discover the answers. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose. Look for questions that may lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the readings more meaningful.
- **Pay attention to the authors' messages.** As with any skill, critical reading improves with practice. Remember that a good author uses every word in a text deliberately. Try to be aware of what the authors are revealing about themselves and what they want you to learn about life from their perspectives.
- **Analyze themes.** Try to analyze the important themes of a story and to consider the premises the author started with. Imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking, "what if" questions.
- **Get to know the characters.** When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Judge them. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Are the tone and style of their dialogue authentic? Read portions aloud to get to know the voices of the characters.
- **Notice the structure of the stories as well as the organization of the entire book.** Sometimes the structure of the book illustrates an important concept or helps to create a mood. Notice how the editor structured the book. How do the stories relate to each other? How are the individual stories and selections structured?

- **Who are the narrators?** How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Is it written in flashbacks? Does the sequence of actions make sense to you?
- **Make comparisons to other stories and works.** Compare the book and the stories to others that have a similar theme or style. Often, themes run through an author's works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author's work to that of another can help you solidify your opinions, as well as illuminate qualities you may otherwise miss.
- **Think about what the author doesn't say as well as what they do say.** During a book discussion, what you're really talking about is everything that the author hasn't said – all those white spaces on the printed page. (Incidentally, this "everything that the author hasn't said" idea is why poetry makes such a rich topic for discussion.)

## Suggested Book Discussion Questions for *Aloft*

Discussion questions are taken from the Readers Guides from both Riverhead Books ([www.riverheadbooks.com](http://www.riverheadbooks.com)) and Bloomsbury Publishing Plc ([www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)). The page numbers are from the Riverhead Books' paperback edition.

1. *Aloft* is told entirely in Jerry Battle's voice. How effective did you find this technique? How would you describe the tone of Jerry's narrative?
2. What is the significance of the book's title? How does Lee use the metaphor of flying to illustrate Jerry's character? Discuss this metaphor of flight as it relates to Jerry's propensity for escapism and for distancing himself from the problems that arise in the world.
3. "...It's you, Jerry, like always. You're the one never budging from the center of the show. You're forever the star." (page 61) Do you agree with Rita? How would you describe Jerry? How does he feel about himself? How much does he change by the end of the book?
4. Jerry has important relationships with three women: Daisy, Rita, and Kelly. These relationships are complicated and interrelated. How would you describe each of those relationships? What is the common thread running through these very different relationships?
5. Could Jerry have helped both Daisy and Kelly more? What were the happiest moments of the life he shared with Daisy? Why does he seem incapable of committing himself to Rita? Why doesn't Jerry do more to help Kelly in her most desperate moment of need?
6. Why did Rita help Jerry raise Jack and Theresa when he denied her the opportunity to have children of her own?
7. When Jerry goes to Richie's house to look for Rita and is reluctantly drawn into a high-wager tennis match, he allows his plane to be the collateral with which he will play. *Donnie* is Jerry's favorite escape. Is his willingness to sacrifice it enough to show Rita that he wants her back? Why does Rita decide to stay and help Jerry put his family back together again?
8. How differently does Jerry deal with Theresa's illness than he did with Daisy's?
9. Rita tells Jerry "...everything you do – or don't want to do, more like – has an origin in what happened to Daisy, which at this point is really what happened to *you*." (page 273) Do all of Jerry's problems stem from Daisy's death?
10. When Paul and Jerry are in Pop's bedroom watching TV, Paul explains that the problem with the world is that everyone is too self absorbed: "They think they can go anywhere and do anything, as if none of their actions has any bearing except on themselves." (page 298) Jerry often characterizes himself in much the same way. Does he excuse all his family members of their faults with the same justification? How, if at all, does learning more about Daisy's last few hours change Jerry's opinions about himself? And of Jack?

11. "...You have to squash her every once in a while. I mean completely flatten her..." (page 110) How have Pop's attitudes to women and life affected Jerry, and in particular his relationship with Daisy? How different is Jerry from Pop? How does he feel about Pop?
12. Jack and Pop form a close bond. Why is Jack more able than Jerry to relate to Pop? What are the differences between Jack and Jerry?
13. Theresa tells Jerry, "I always thought you were just right, especially as a dad." (page 257) What kind of parent is Jerry? Why does Theresa then follow that remark with "Maybe not for Jack but for me."? Do you think that Jack feels the same as Theresa toward their father? How are Theresa and Jack different? How have Jerry's attempts at detachment from his family affected Theresa and Jack?
14. Why is Theresa so determined to have her baby, even at the cost of her own life?
15. How does Jerry characterize Theresa's death? How would Jerry view Daisy's death in contrast? What is your interpretation of the circumstances that lead to each woman's passing?
16. Jerry and Paul appear to be completely different. However, Jerry has a great liking for Paul, and Paul confides in Jerry about his difficulties with Theresa. What is the foundation of their relationship? What are the similarities between them.
17. On the surface Paul and Jack are completely different: Paul is a small, wiry bookworm, an out-of-work writer, while Jack is a natural-born athlete and manager of the Battle family business. While the differences are apparent, both men practice a form of denial with regard to their relationships with their wives. How are both men governed by the demands of these relationships? Discuss the differences and similarities between Jack and Paul as they try to cope with the conflicts of their married lives.
18. To what effect is humor used in *Aloft*? Did you find yourself laughing with Jerry, or at him? How did this affect your view of his character?
19. Travel is very important to Jerry. What does his attitude towards it, and towards his Parade Travel customers, tell us about him?
20. Jack and Theresa are mixed-race, Rita is Puerto Rican and Paul is Asian-American. How important is race and racial identity in the novel? What is Jerry's attitude towards it?
21. "Jerry Battle hereby declines the Real. I really do. Or maybe, on the contrary, I'm inviting it in." (page 243) Does Jerry ultimately decline or embrace 'the Real'?
22. The novel begins with Jerry flying in his plane and ends with him stepping into a rectangular hole in the ground that will later be a pool, lying down, and looking up at the sky. Discuss the symbolism of the book's final image and how it relates to the metaphor of flight throughout the rest of the novel.

## If You Liked *Aloft* – Suggested Titles

- Auster, Paul. *The Brooklyn Follies*. Picador, 2006.
- Badami, Anita Rau. *The Hero's Walk*. Algonquin Books, 2001.
- Banville, John. *The Sea*. Vintage 2006.
- Begley, Louis. *About Schmidt*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.
- Begley, Louis. *Mistler's Exit*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.
- Begley, Louis. *Shipwreck*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.
- Bellow, Saul. *Seize the Day*. Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Brookner, Anita. *Making Things Better*. Random House, 2003.
- Cather, Willa. *The Professor's House*. Vintage Classics, 1990.
- Ford, Richard. *Independence Day*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.
- Ford, Richard. *The Lay of the Land*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.
- Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2001.
- Haddon, Mark. *A Spot of Bother*. Vintage, 2007.
- Hellenga, Robert. *Philosophy Made Simple*. Back Bay Books, 2007.
- Lerher, Jim. *Eureka*. Random House, 2007.
- Martin, Steve. *Shopgirl*, Goldman, 2002.
- McLarty, Ron. *The Memory of Running*. Viking Press, 2004.
- Nelson, Antonya. *Talking in Bed*. Scribner, 1998.
- O'Brien, Tim. *July, July*. Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- Roth, Phillip. *Everyman*. Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Zweibel, Alan. *The Other Shulman*. Villard, 2006.

## Further Reading

Buck, Robert N. *North Star Over My Shoulder: a flying life.*

Christensen, Perry M. and Benson L. Porter. *Family 360: a proven way to get your family to talk, solve problems, and improve relationships.*

Covey, Stephen R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families.*

Fowler, Ron. *Lessons from the Logbook: flying techniques from the best teacher of all, experience.*

Goyer, Robert editor. *I Learned About Flying From That: first-hand accounts of mishaps to avoid from real-life pilots.*

McClendon, Ruth. *Reconciling Relationships and Preserving the Family Business: tools for success.*

Niven, David. *Simple Secrets of Happy Families: what scientists have learned and how you can use it.*

Sadler, William A. *The Third Age: six principles of growth and renewal after forty.*

South, Mary. *The Cure for Anything is Salt Water: how I threw my life overboard and found happiness at sea.*

Westheimer, Ruth K. *Conquering the Rapids of Life: making the most of midlife opportunities.*

## Related Films

*American Beauty*, 1970.

*City Slickers*, 1991.

*Huff*, the complete first season, 2004-2005, TV series.

*King of the Corner*, 2003.

*La Grande Bouffe* (The Big Feast), 1973, French, NC-17.

*Last of the Red Hot Lovers*, 1972.

*Ultimas imágenes del naufragio* (Last Images of the Shipwreck), 1985, Spanish.

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**Contact your public library for more information about  
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## Long Island Reads 2008 Evaluation

1. Have you read *Aloft*? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_. If no, do you plan to? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
2. Have you visited the Long Island Reads website at [www.longislandreads.org](http://www.longislandreads.org)?  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
3. Have you participated in any Long Island Reads events in the past? Yes \_\_\_  
No \_\_\_ If yes, which one(s)? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Did you attend a Long Island Reads Book Club Summit? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_. If  
yes, which one? \_\_\_\_\_
5. How did you hear about the Book Club Summit(s)?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Are you in a Book Club? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
7. If you are in a Book Club, please tell us a little about your club: (For example:  
How often do you meet? How do you select the books? Where do you  
meet? How many people are members? Male or female only? Male and  
female? Age range? Type of books selected; fiction, non-fiction, classics,  
etc.?)
8. If you would like to suggest an author or title for Long Island Reads 2009,  
please do so below. Please let us know why you think this would be a  
good choice.

Your name (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

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