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Local author's debut novel 'A River of Stars'

By Lou Fancher



Author Vanessa Hua Photos Andria Lo

Orinda writer Vanessa Hua's debut novel, "A River of Stars" (Ballantine), tells the story of Scarlett Chen, a young woman eight months pregnant. Sent from China by her married lover to a secret maternity center in the United States to gain advantageous citizenship for her soon-to-be-born baby, Scarlett and Daisy, a volatile teenager and fellow "inmate" in Mama Fang's mother-to-be prison, escape captivity in a stolen van. Venturing from Los Angeles to San Francisco's Chinatown, the two women confront first-time motherhood, poverty and hardscrabble life in America-Scarlett, as an immigrant with only a temporary visa. With time, intelligence and fierce mother-love, they forge connections having nothing to do with blood relatives or nationality to create families, secure improved fortune and establish newfound identities.

Hua is a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle and author of the short story collection, "Deceit and Other Possibilities." Her work has appeared in The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Washington Post, and more. Winner of a number of awards and fellowships, Hua writes most often about Chinese-American immigrants, social justice, citizenship outside of the dominant narratives and the cultural and economic forces operating in disenfranchised or emerging communities worldwide.

At a literary luncheon Aug. 27 at Orinda Books, approximately 40 people enjoyed a meal prepared by bookstore owner Maria Roden while listening to Hua's presentation and book reading. A Q&A allowed readers to gain insight into the backstory behind the longtime

journalist's first novel.

Hua's parents, born in China, met in Chicago in the 1960s, and then moved to Orinda in 1975, the year Hua was born. She attended Wagner Ranch Elementary School and Miramonte High School. During childhood, she was an avid reader, especially of books with "feisty girls who wanted to be writers," like the protagonists in Little Women and Anne of Green Gables. "I would read after lights out, but get busted by my dad because he'd come back and check the lamp and find it was warm," she said. A story she wrote in second grade was selected as class favorite, but she overheard a classmate say she'd only voted for it because it was the longest story. Demonstrating a light sense of humor and thick-skin sensibility that prevails in the characters and stories she creates, Hua said, "I got used to thoughtless reviews early on."

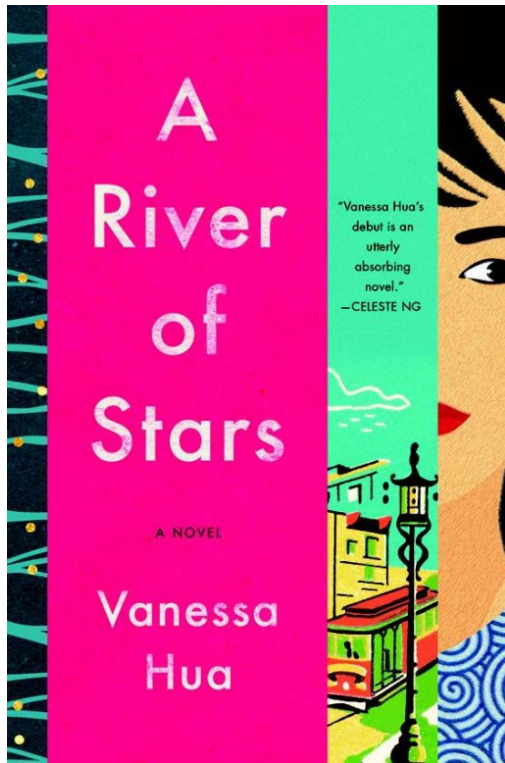
After she began writing fiction again in 2004, Hua found herself making small talk with a colleague about wanting to write a novel. "Go do it then," the woman said. Encouraged, challenged, an MFA from UC Riverside in hand, she pursued the long-held goal. Appreciating the mix of journalism's sprint-like pace and a fiction writer's marathon journeys, she allowed her natural curiosity full reign while researching "River of Stars" topics: women's reproductive choices in China, motherhood-Hua was "hugely pregnant with twins" during the writing process-and the vitality of San Francisco's Chinatown.

Her book, she said, was written with purpose. "To deny a story is to deny humanity. I write to inspire action, change thinking. Literary fiction fosters empathy because it puts you deep in the hearts of others."

Fiction, she said later, "flourishes where the official record ends (in contrast to journalism). I have license to make it up and amend the facts."

People asked Hua the usual questions about writing workshops, agents and getting published. She said the value of attending workshops varies depending on classmates and instructors, but having a support group helps a writer during times of struggle or success. Her initial attempt at writing a novel—a book about Chairman Mao's teenage lover who was into swing dancing—failed to sell in her first outing. "It came close with my first agent but didn't sell," she said, adding a joke: "Close only matters in horseshoes and grenades, right?" Actually, Hua was both right and wrong about that: her second, current agent has recently sold the Mao/dancing book.

Asked about Hollywood and the potential for film adaptations of "River of Stars," Hua was visibly animated. "One can dream. I know a movie like the current hit, 'Crazy Rich Asians,' does open the possibilities. You never know what might make something happen. Asian Americans are the fastest growing group in America."



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