

INHERITING MEMORIES

Empire of Glass is based on the stories of a Chinese family, who had hosted the novel's American author. **Jocelyn Eikenburg** reports.

At the heart of Kaitlin Solimine's lyrical debut novel *Empire of Glass* are relationships she first forged over two decades ago with her Chinese homestay family in Beijing.

"I hadn't married into this family. Really, there was nothing except the happenstance of having been assigned to them. But we were very, very close," says Solimine, who spent a high school semester living with them in 1996.

"My family was very American middle class, which meant something very different compared to what was Chinese middle class in the 1990s. Yet I was taken in. It wasn't like, 'Oh you're American, how special you are.' It was really, 'Hey, you're family now.'"

That intimacy deepened after a death in the family.

Just weeks into her first year in college, Solimine received a letter from her host family with a photo of a gravestone bearing the name of its matriarch Liming (her given name).

"I was shocked. It wasn't at all what I was expecting — my Chinese sister writing to me, in both English and Chinese, saying that my Chinese host mother had been sick and passed away."

During that summer after her freshman year, she came to China as a travel guide researcher and first visited the family in Beijing, where she learned what had happened and mourned the loss of Liming with them.

"As a result of experiencing that grief together, I grew even closer to my host sister and father in ways I never expected."

When she visited Liming's grave for the first time, the widower said, in a message for Liming, that Solimine would take care of their daughter after his death.

The family apartment in Beijing became a second home to Solimine, and she often stayed there during her summers in college and, later, graduate school.

"I felt like there was something so compelling about being so close to this family," Solimine says, adding that it meant being privileged to hear threads of family stories from Liming's husband.



Above: Kaitlin Solimine has dinner with her Chinese homestay family at their apartment in Beijing in 1996. **Top right:** *Empire of Glass*, a novel by Solimine about her relationships with the Chinese family. **Right:** Solimine will bring her novel to audiences in China this week at the Bookworm Literary Festival in Beijing. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



“ I was thinking a lot about what it meant that in many ways I inherited this family's story — what it meant that I wanted to write it and that I wanted to fictionalize it.”

Kaitlin Solimine, author of *Empire of Glass*

So when she discovered the creative track of the Fulbright program, she applied for — and ultimately received — a grant to fund an entire year in China, recording the family stories and exploring her place in the family.

"I wanted to spend time with the family and understand their history and think more critically

about my relationship with them," she says.

The intention was to craft a nonfiction work.

"A lot of time had passed, but I had access to these vivid, beautiful memories," she says of the family's old stories.

But as she began writing the book, Solimine found herself

drawn to fiction instead.

"What I was really investigating through the process of writing this, was what it meant to be an outsider carrying a lot of historical, cultural constraints. I was thinking a lot about what it meant that in many ways I inherited this family's story — what it meant that I wanted to write it and that I wanted to fictionalize it."

This thought process led her to frame the novel as a translation by an American named Lao K, who was also an actor in the story, translating something she was responsible for.

"I wanted it to be clear that translation can be very fraught. There's a personal piece to that — every translation is going to be owned by the translator. It's all about your own perspective and

how you interpret those words."

At the same time, the translated work at the center of *Empire of Glass* — a story first told by the mother and later by the father — reflects Solimine's thoughtful fascination with the many layers of memories she encountered in the process of exploring the family's history.

"I had such a short period of time talking to Liming, inheriting Liming's stories directly from her. Then I had this added layer of inheriting them from her husband, and my own memory of her and what I wanted to believe that she was. When we rewrite other people's histories, what does that mean in terms of how they are told?"

Solimine is grateful for the recognition *Empire of Glass* has

received, including being short listed for the 2017 Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, an annual award presented by The Center for Fiction, a nonprofit organization in New York City, for the best debut novel.

As she brings her novel to audiences in China, including over March 24-25 at the Bookworm Literary Festival in Beijing, Solimine also looks forward to seeing her former host family — and passing on her special connection to China.

"Personally, this is my first visit to China with my daughter. I'm really, really excited about that. It's such a meaningful experience for us."

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Richard Flanagan and Yu Hua discuss writing and inspiration

By MEI JIA

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It is Saturday, when Australian writer Richard Flanagan meets Yu Hua for the first time during an event at a Beijing bookstore. They seem to find a lot in common and any third person is unnecessary in their exchanges. They just know the right questions to ask one another.

Yu, the author of the Chinese novels *To Live* and *Brothers*, speaks of the many things that made him the writer he is today. He is neither reluctant to praise Flanagan's Man Booker-winning novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, saying that, from its rhythm, he knows how well the story is told and structured.

The authors have been inspired by William Faulkner and Franz Kafka.

"Yu Hua, Faulkner and I are all southerners," Flanagan says.

The Tasmania-born writer has read Yu's books, and he says some of his works seem to be "simple telling of very small stories, dealing with small things. But through these small stories, you gain a picture of this extraordinary country and its extraordinary transformations over the last 50 years".



Australian writer Richard Flanagan (second left) and Chinese writer Yu Hua (second right) meet readers at an event in Beijing on Saturday. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Yu, born in Zhejiang province, tells Flanagan during the same conversation that Faulkner is his third "teacher", the first being Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata, followed by Kafka.

"At different phases in my writing career, I encountered different problems. Faulkner taught me about ways to depict mental activities," Yu says.

Because of sharply contrasting writing styles — one delicate

and gentle, and one straightforward and sometimes decorated with coarse language — Yu says Japanese reporters are surprised that he has read Kawabata's books.

"I was so fascinated by him that I would buy a book by him even if there was only one story in the book that I hadn't read," Yu says.

Kafka occurred to Yu at the right time in 1986. Kafka's *A*

Country Doctor inspired him to believe that through writing, the writers should set themselves free and not be fettered by literary skills.

Flanagan's literary influences include Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, many Russian writers and his father.

"Writers are people from Europe and the United States, not from here (his hometown)," he says.

"Even in 2014, when I visited the US, I was introduced as an award-winning French writer to the audience," he jokes.

He was lucky to have his father, who loves poetry, and believes in the power and beauty of the written word. His love for words started at the age of 3, and he received his education at the University of Tasmania and later at Worcester College of Oxford.

His father's experiences and survival along the "death railway" in Myanmar during World War II pushed him to finish writing *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, a story about an army doctor who was captured by the Japanese, just like his father.

"I spent 12 years and I wrote five drafts," he recalls. "I want to dedicate the book to my father."

He says he knew that if he hadn't finished the book before his father died, he wouldn't finish it at all. He finished the book in 2013, the same year his father died, age 98, but his late father didn't have the opportunity to know about the book's award-winning ability.

Whereas for Yu, who had been assigned to be a dentist in 1978 under the old employment sys-

tem, the path of becoming a writer was different.

"I was not trained to be a dentist, and on my first day, I was taught a bit and asked to pull out patients' teeth," Yu says.

"I worked eight hours a day and I was really jealous of those who worked at the cultural bureau — who earned as much as me but had more leisure time," he says.

"I wanted a job transfer and the only way was to write stories and try to get them published."

He says prominent Chinese authors such as Mo Yan and Wang Shuo are said to have started writing for better living.

Wu Qi, with the One Way Space Bookstore, the venue for the conversation between Flanagan and Yu, says "it's like we've had this wonderful literature class".

Yu says inspiration arrives to a writer occasionally.

"It only appears once or twice in your life. So your chance of becoming a writer is bigger when you sit there for three to four hours a day writing and make that last for a whole year," Yu says.

Flanagan compares writing to fishing: "Everyday you must go out fishing in order to catch something."