Season Two, Episode One: The Art of Fiction with Aimee Liu, Pete Hsu, and Lily Hoang, moderated by Monica Fernandez

INTRO:
Welcome to Red Hen Radio, a podcast brought to you by Red Hen Press. We're a nonprofit publisher fostering diverse stories every year. On this podcast, you'll get to hear from the people who are inside the literary world, the authors and publishing professionals who are working hard to keep independent literature thriving. Stay with us as we introduce you to today's segment.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
Hello listeners, Monica Fernandez, Red Hen Press Media Director, here, and welcome to the season two premiere of Red Hen Radio. We're so excited to kick off our second season, which will be full of discussions and insight on the craft of writing, the process of publishing, and the importance of storytelling. Today's episode is the art of fiction, and I'm joined today by three incredible authors. We have Amy Liu, the author of *Glorious Boy*. Pete Su, the author of *If I Were the Ocean, I'd Carry You Home*, and Lily Hoang, author of *Underneath* and co-author of her latest trilingual release, *Timber & Lua*, alongside her co-author Vi Khi Nao. Welcome, everyone. We're so glad you're able to join us today. As a fiction writer myself, I'm especially excited to dive into this discussion today. For listeners meeting you for the first time, how do you usually explain what you write about? And how has that answer changed over time, if at all? Aimee, let's start with you.

AIMEE LIU:
In my fiction, it's all been one way or another related to my Asian-American background, my parents, my grandparents, my family's experience living in India. And the first one, *Face*, was about my own sort of confusion over my ethnic identity, given that my father is half-Chinese, born and raised in China, and my mother's very American, and then when I was in my early 20s, I spent a lot of time in Chinatown in New York. And so that influenced what I was dealing with.

But I suppose, you know, one way or another, all of my fiction deals with identity issues about, you know, the part of me that is Asian and the struggle to come to terms with the fact that my own father—and especially his father and his parents—had such a completely different experience of being alive in the first...well, for my grandparents, their entire lives. My grandfather in particular, his lifespan from Imperial China to Revolutionary China and ended with a communist. So my father grew up in the transition from Imperial China to Republican China. And he turned out to be much more Chinese, I think, than my white American mother ever wanted to think about. And so a lot of my fiction has dealt with that kind of struggle to come to terms with the Asian part of me and the Asian part of him and how that really has influenced my entire life.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
I love that, and that definitely shows in the work that you've put out, and that's such a personal kind of experience. So thank you so much for sharing that. Pete, how about you?

PETE HSU:
Yep. This question is sometimes hard for me to answer because I feel like I've always tried to answer based on what I'm currently working on. And that changes from time to time. There was a period where I was working on a lot of more experimental work and then stuff that was more speculative. I think a through line, though, through everything that I write, it's literary fiction and involves some family dynamics. That's part of, like, the core of what I'm writing about.

Especially my story collection. I feel like that's really just a lot of family dynamics. I write a lot about loss and a lot about grief, a lot about families with missing people. So that's one thing I tend to focus a lot on in my writing, and then I think maybe genre-wise, I just kind of go like project by project. So currently I'm working on a Western. So when people ask me what I'm writing, I say, *Well, I'm writing a Western.* So, and we'll see…the next novel…I think I'm hopefully gonna be done with this one soon. Working on the second one a little bit. It's a literary horror novel, so then I'm gonna start telling people I write horror. I think I'm just gonna go with that probably from now on. Just whatever project I'm working on is how I'm gonna describe my writing.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
I love that. That makes so much sense, and I'm excited to read a Western from you. We'll talk a little bit about, like, genres and kind of specific genres in a second, but Lily, how would you describe what you write about?

LILY HOANG:
Pete, I definitely feel you with that. I don't, I try to hedge the question as much as I can. When I really have to describe it, I will reluctantly describe what I do as "experimental." I think that is something that all of my books do share, is challenging whatever genre it is in some way. And also with a keen focus on the fairy tale, which again, is interpreted in many different ways. *Underneath* is a very realist novel, and then in the middle of it, I drop a fairy tale in just for fun, and in my non-fiction as well. I think, yeah, fairy tales and experimental-ish.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
Yeah, I definitely see that in the work that you've done with Red Hen and it has struck me that the writing that you've put out with us has really been so strange, but so very kind of lasting. Like it's definitely haunted me for quite a while. And so I'm excited to kind of get into what makes you write that way. But you had spoken a little bit about nonfiction. That segues quite well into my next question. I know this episode is titled The Art of Fiction, but I noticed all three

of you also dabbled in some nonfiction as well. Do you prefer one over the other and how do you decide which to write and when?

AIMEE LIU:
I have always done nonfiction kind of as my bread and butter writing. I've done lots of co-authorships and many, many ghostwritten projects, including a number of number one bestsellers that I've ghostwritten. So, and they've all been nonfiction. I have not done as much creative nonfiction in my own writing, I've considered fiction to be my own writing although I'm now forever working on a collection of essays that are personal essays related to my family that came out because I realized that I had been warping my family history out of not knowing about it. And I'd warped a number of very important aspects of my father in particular and my father's experience. I felt I needed to use the non-fiction to kind of really drill into the truth and unpack the truth in a way that I had deluded myself I was doing in fiction. But I realized now that I didn't. was making up a story that I think the family was perfectly happy to hear. But it was far from what the reality was that I discovered after my father died. So I do both for very different reasons.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
It makes a lot of sense and it's so important to kind of get your family story right. And I imagine that that has really been such a moving process for you to kind of dive into that despite what the story is that you kind of wanted to tell yourself. So that is a very brave, brave thing to do to dive into family history. Lily, how about you?

LILY HOANG:
Whatever project I'm writing, it will tell me what genre it wants to be in, whether it's fiction or nonfiction. So I often tell my students that being a writer is 50 % scientist, 50 % mystic. And so part of it is just feeling your way and knowing what the thing wants to be. I mean, I think that fiction and nonfiction have very different building blocks.

Right? So for fiction, you're using world building and character building in order to tell the story of conflict. Whereas like nonfiction is all about, I think, rhetorical persuasion. So ethos, pathos, and logos as a way of like persuading your reader of something. So I think that the project and then the toys are different. But when I start a project, I don't know what it will be. And at some point, I will have enough pieces and then the piece will tell me what it wants to be. So whether it wants to be a novel or an essay collection, but the pieces just, they start the same way and then eventually they'll feel different and then I'll know. And then I will know like where to follow and what to pursue.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:

I love when a project tells you what it wants. It's my favorite part about writing when you're kind of just like you think something is gonna go one way and then all of a sudden it's just like, nope, we're going this way. And that, yeah, I just love that feeling. Pete, what about you?

PETE HSU:
All right. I have actually never initiated a nonfiction work of any kind. I've written nonfiction pieces that have been requested of me, but there's no like impulse in me to write nonfiction. I think that's probably the most succinct and simple answer to the question. Yeah, what I write is fiction. I'm drawn towards fiction. I really much prefer to read fiction. I'll read nonfiction as part of research, but not really for fun for the most part. I wonder if it's because I just don't particularly like the actual world that we live in and these like made up worlds, both my own and other people's are far more interesting for me. Or on the other hand, maybe they're just safer because however dangerous a fictional world is, it's still under the assumption of being false, nonfiction, maybe it's too close to reality. But I don't really know, I don't have a good answer.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
No, I completely agree. And I feel the exact same way. Like, I can't really write nonfiction without feeling the pressure of being factually accurate or politically correct or inoffensive or anything like that. There's just too much kind of going on. And there's so much safety in fiction and kind of building those worlds yourself. And as you mentioned, the danger doesn't really even fit with what you're writing. That's really the only danger associated with fiction. But that's really interesting.

I guess as another follow-up, if you've only written nonfiction because you've been asked, how have those experiences been for you?

PETE HSU:
Kind of terrible, feel like, be honest. I mean, I'll definitely do it if someone who wants me to write like an interview or a book review or something like that, I'm happy to do it. Or even something that's more like an essay. I don't mind, but I always feel like it's bad at the end. Like I didn't do a good job. And I think it's something that you just said, Monica, kind of resonates with me. I think I don't really have like a robust memory. So I'm very bad with facts. So if I'm trying to write nonfiction, I tend to slip into making stuff up and it takes me a lot of work to make sure I didn't leave something in there that I made up. So anyway, so I think that's one of the big reasons with fiction I love it because everything's made up. And even like historical fiction, my Western is kind of based in history, but you know, if I make it up, it's still fiction. No one can be that mad. Well, someone will be mad, I'm sure, but it's a under the label of, this is made up. This is all made up.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:

Yeah, I love that.

LILY HOANG:
Can I ask a follow up to Amy?

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
Yeah!

LILY HOANG:
Amy, can you talk about ghost writing? I think we're also attached to, you know, ourselves as authors and here you're letting go of that ownership, but it's still your words. How do you negotiate that?

AIMEE LIU:
Ghost wrote my first book when I was about 26. So I've been doing it from almost from the very beginning of my writing career. My first book was my own, was a memoir that I wrote when I was 23. But I love letting go of myself, I find the ghostwriting so much easier. I can slip into somebody else's priorities, their voice, their experience. The ghostwriting that I've done has not been, with one or two exceptions, it hasn't been memoirs. For a long time I was doing sort of psychological how-to self-help kind of books, and now I do more business and policy and stuff like that. I've gotten to the point where I pick and choose. I don't ghostwrite projects that I have no interest in or where I don't respect the author or the author's experience. So for me, ghostwriting is like a big fun research project. I dive into somebody else's world. I learn a ton about stuff that I have never thought about before. And then the best part of it is I write the book, I get paid, and I move on to my own stuff. I don't have to spend the next two years worrying about promotion. I enjoy promoting my own books, but because I'm not a really good multitasker, when I'm promoting a book, I cannot focus and write the next one. So I love ghostwriting a book. I spend a year on it, sometimes a little more. And then, you know, I send it off, we get approved. Sometimes I'm dragged through the editing process, but then I'm done. And it's all up to the author to do the promotion. Nobody's got that luxury when it's your own book. I mean, people do that, but it's to the book's detriment. You really have to promote your work.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
I read recently about Emma Watson and her acting career and how she loves acting, but she hates the process of promoting. And so that's kind of why she kind of stepped away from acting because it really was killing her soul to like do the promotion. She loved the work and the art but the necessary steps of promoting the work are just so difficult and time consuming and really soul-sucking and stuff. So I definitely get that why a ghostwriting experience can be so much more preferable.

So whatever project you're working on, how do you know when it's working or not working? I know for myself, sometimes I get bursts of inspiration and I write for weeks and then it just runs out and I think maybe I just don't haven't planned far enough. I don't know how it's going to end. I haven't figured out how my character is going to get out of it. Does this happen to you and what makes you decide to push through versus abandon the project for at least a little while? Maybe we can start with Pete this time.

PETE HSU:
I really only know if something is finally working once it's done and like out in the world. And at that point, I feel like I don't even know if it's really working or not, but I've, I've stopped trying to figure out how to make it work because it's done and there's nothing left to be done about it. Up until that point, I feel like everything is still up in the air and still being tinkered with and not even tinkered with, sometimes it's even open towards like massive renovation. That's the only answer I can come up with. Cause I think once it's done, I don't think about it anymore. But until then it just continues to be, you know, revised going through like cycles of love and loathing where it's like genius or it's total garbage. That cycle, I feel like never stops until it's like no longer in my hands. But as long as it's in my hands, it's always going to be continually worked over.

There is no end point except for when I've no longer have access to it.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
I love that and that's actually such a beautiful kind of way to look at your projects. Like instead of abandoning it, you're more just like letting it breathe. You're gonna come back to it, and God, the cycle of loving and loathing your work is just, I relate to that so much because I have work that I hadn't looked at or touched for years, maybe like five to seven years. And then I like just read it back recently and like *This is actually pretty good. Maybe I can like come back to this and revive it a little bit.* It's funny how that happens. Lily, how about you?

LILY HOANG:
I think, you know, working in the long form is just, so, it's so difficult. And I don't know that I ever know when it's working or not working, but I do know that, you know, I have to push forward and I can't go back and revise, at least with the first draft. It's like you're, you're racing against the clock to get the thing finished. Maybe because I, you know, I think that writing in the long form is such a difficult process. It's like you have to stay in the suspended state of delusion to continue so that you can finish it. And if you pause and revise even a chapter, that's it. I'm teaching a class on the novella right now. And with my students, kept on, they wanted to go back and revise things. And I was like, *no, you can't revise*. You just have to get to the end. Because

when you get to the end, that will change everything. And it will change how you approach the beginning.

So if you revise chapter one 15 times, it won't matter because once you get to the end, you're going to have to go back to the beginning again, no matter what. So you might as well just keep on pushing through to get to that end point. In any long form project that I'm working on, I just have to, at least with the first draft, just work as hard as I can to get the thing out. And then when I get to the end, then the scientist mystic part, once you get to the end and you start revising, then the scientist takes over and you can actually have control over the thing you're working on. But before then, I think with the first draft, it's all magical. Like, I don't know where the thing comes from. It just comes. My characters are doing things that I have no control over. I did not plan it. And here they are acting and doing pretty much whatever they want. But in revision, *you can say like, no, character. You can't do that anymore. I'm the boss here.*

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
That's such great advice. This is more like a personal kind of follow-up question, but like, what if you are writing a thing and then you kind of realize things are veering off course from what you imagined and it doesn't make sense with the beginning anymore? Do you just keep going and then like just make a note for yourself?

LILY HOANG:
Absolutely, yeah, totally. Just make a note wherever it is. Let's say you're on page 65 and you've decided, *no, this thing shouldn't be in third person.* It needs to be in first person. Just put a note. Everything, like I'm changing the point of view here and then keep on that track, but with the new point of view. So when I revise, I retype the entire thing. After the first draft is done, I will finish it, give myself a month away from the text, and then I'll go back and read the thing cover to cover and make all of my notes in it, and then I'll retype the whole thing. But with the notes, I'm not doing it from memory or anything. It's easier to change point of view or tense, things like that, when you're retyping. Because if you go back in and you try to change every is to was, you'll never catch them all, and it'll take you a much longer time. I would strongly recommend don't go back and tinker. Keep moving forward until you get to the end.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
That's great advice. Thank you so much for that. Amy, what about you?

AIMEE LIU:
That is really great advice and I'm with you, Monica. I think it's the perfectionistic streak because I have to go back to read it to kind of work up the momentum to keep pushing forward. And every time you do that, you wanna change it. I did discover a trick that is very helpful in getting past this. It's an app called Natural Reader where you can put in your material and it will be read

back to you. You get to choose a voice that's like the characters or like your own voice or whatever. But I try to read my work, but when I'm reading it myself, I'll stop and fix stuff. And with Natural Reader, it just keeps going. I mean, you can stop it, but it's reading to you. You don't really want to interrupt. And it's such a great tool for getting you through a whole chapter or as much material as you want to put in. And it kind of, you can make a note, you can be reading along on your own manuscript and, you know, just make a side note that, you know, stop here or you can circle something that just didn't quite land right to go back to it later. But meanwhile, the story's moving on and I have found it to be just an enormously helpful tool in writing.

And the other thing is, in terms of just seeing the quality, evaluating the work, I don't think there's any way around putting it in a drawer for a month or two and coming back to it. It is the one fatal flaw of having a close deadline on something. You know, the people who sign a contract for a big book and then the publisher wants another big book in a year, those second books are never, ever, ever at the same quality as the first book which took five years to write. It just never is. So it's a real detriment I mean, it may work commercially because those authors are getting readers who are still hungry, you know, they're hungry from the first book to have a second book, but it's really bad for the material, I think.

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MONICA FERNANDEZ:
Okay, I'm going to dive into some more specific questions about each of your work. I think we're going to to Pete first. So Pete, the art of the short story is a particular skill in itself, having to build a world, introduce characters, make the reader care about them, and take them on a journey, all in just a few pages. What draws you to this form rather than longer form fiction?

PETE HSU:
Great question. I think about this a lot. The only class I teach is short story writing. Comes up in conversation with my students frequently. It's not so much because they want to be like expert short story writers. It's just, I think that's a good way to build a writing portfolio, a writing career. So I think I have a few like general thoughts. So I think short stories have more leeway than long form fiction in that you can experiment with a lot more in terms of voice, because there's certain voices that you can't really carry on for 300 pages without losing your audience or your reader. Whereas for 10 to 20 pages, you can do any voice. It can be so grating and annoying. It can be second person as intense with lots of breaks into past and future. And people can kind of roll with it for a short piece, especially if they're reading a short story, because if you're reading a short story, you kind of have higher tolerance for that kind of stuff anyway.

So I think there's that that freedom. You don't have to follow like a traditional three act protagonist arc that's not really necessary. Definitions of conflict are much looser. So all those things make it a lot more fun.

Another big thing I really love about short story writing is that you guys probably all heard this quote from Joy Williams, *The novel wants to befriend you, but the short story almost never.* And it's like what you're trying to do in a novel, you have to actually care about your reader. You have to, you know, like pay attention and like be cognizant of their feelings and their offenses and you know, just like love them. But the short story, you can mess with them all you want. It doesn't matter. And actually it's sort of like the push is for you to mess with them. Like that's kind of what the short stories should be disturbing. Not in my, in my point of view, not every short story, but how I look at short stories should be jarring, should be open-ended at the end. And really you just hit a point where you get, you hit one point, but the rest of the world, you still have no idea what to make of it or what happens next.

So those are some of the reasons why I think they're really interesting and engaging for me to read and to write. Some of it also is I've always had ADHD. And so I think as a kid, I always loved reading short stories because I can maintain the focus. So I kind of built up a lot of like just short story thinking in my head, I think.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
That makes a lot of sense, yeah. And I mean, I definitely feel the same way and you make such incredible points that I've never thought about before. The short stories have always intimidated me a little bit because I just kind of feel like I need so much more space to build this world and kind of make people care about the characters that I'm writing.

But I really admire the stories in your book, *If I Were the Ocean, I'd Carry You Home*, just because they really plop you into a world, to a perspective, to a situation, and it's just done so easily. I just kind of feel like when I try and do that, I'm always like, *but you have to know this, this, and this, and this is what happened before that, and this is how they got there.* But you just have so much confidence and make trusting that the reader can kind of infer that themselves.

I think I just have to build up a little bit more trust for those readers, but thank you so much for that, Pete.

Lily and Amy, you've both written work around real life events. Amy's *Glorious Boy* takes place in the Andaman Islands during World War II, while Lily's *Underneath* is based on a real set of murders that happened in the 1980s. How does writing within the parameters of historical fact

make the fiction writing experience different? I'm really interested in kind of learning a little bit about how you match and merge fact and fiction.

AIMEE LIU:
I love writing around facts. I mean, I need them. I'm not someone who can just make stuff up. In fact, with *Glorious Boy*, I was trying to write this book for years based on a dream that I had. And all I had was the dream that was the opening scene in the book. And I did use that dream.

But for years it floated around kind of not having a home in the world, not having, I didn't know what time period I was writing in. I wasn't sure where I was in the world, what the larger context was for the very personal story. It wasn't until I went to the Andaman Islands and discovered that it had this incredibly rich World War II history that coincidentally just matched this story in my head of an evacuation happening, all of a sudden I had the whole book unfolded. Basically, kind of the plot of the book effectively wrote itself once I had the nonfiction aspect of it. And then there was so much there on the ground in this story of what had happened there that I could never have made it up. It went so far beyond the possibilities. And so bringing that truth, that historical truth back to life became part of the job of the book and the job of the fiction. But there are writers who can just, you know, make shit up. I'm just not one of them.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
I love that. I mean, I also kind of operate in somewhat of the same way. I like to write urban fantasy, which is mostly like magic in reality. And so I kind of feel like I need the parameters of reality and like society and what's going on in the world and how we all operate and all the technology that we have and everything. And I just kind of like to make stuff up around that, like *what if this happened instead of this?* So I definitely get kind of the need for some kind of structure or a little bit of a guidebook. So that makes a lot of sense.

Lily, how about you?

LILY HOANG:
I struggled writing *Underneath* a lot. It took me many, many years to write the book and to rewrite it and write it again and write it again and write again. Like, took me like 10 years to write this book. But I was really obsessed with the story. The idea that this body that made life became the thing that took it away, that she used her body to murder her children with something that I couldn't get out of my head once it got into my head. But you know, I think that I had a lot of liberty beyond that. Certain components of the story, I kept the actual murders, I kept her name and you know, when she murdered them, the number of husbands that she had. But beyond that, I took like so many liberties. The murders actually took place in Georgia. And I think for the first three drafts of the book, the novel took place in Georgia because I was trying to adhere to the truth of the story, whatever that was, while taking these wild liberties in other ways. But I

was like, no, no, it must take place in Georgia. And then at some point I realized, I've never been to Georgia. I really don't even know what Georgia looks like. And so it was a big change when I decided to put it in New Mexico, which is where I had been living. And so it was a place that I knew very intimately. And I feel like New Mexico and the landscape became a big part of the book itself.

It was really difficult to write the facts of the story and to find a way to fit my story into it. But actually, I think it was a fun challenge. Maybe if not fun, maybe it was just a challenge. In the end, I think that it just took a lot of work and a lot of labor. But I'm really proud of the thing now that it's done. I changed a lot of things. And as I was trying to publish the book, so many editors would come back and say, like, *I will publish this book if you let one of the kids live.* And I was like, *no, no, no, they all must die because this is the story.* The story is they all die. And they're like, *if you let one live, we'll publish it.* And I was like, *absolutely not.*

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
That makes so much sense. *Underneath* was such a haunting read for me when I first read it. And every time I'm trying to pitch it to someone as a new book to read, I tell them that it's about these murders that took place. But it's also more than that. What really makes the book work and is so haunting is that you dive into the psychological kind of parts of why these murders could have, might have happened in the first place. And so I think that that is such a great kind of way to use these facts and then tell your own story. I think you did it really well. And so thank you so much for sharing.

I have another question for you. I want to talk about your latest release, *Timber and Lua,* which is a translation collaboration with Vichy Ngoc in Vietnamese, English, and Vietlish. In addition to the unique formatting of the book, which is three versions of the same story in each of the three languages, the stories themselves are also really experimental. So how did the idea for this book come about? I kind of got the sense that the flow of each story was even affected and changed and influenced by the translations as they were happening.

LILY HOANG:
During COVID, me and I were in a group together and we said, oh, well, you know, you're a writer, I'm a writer, let's write a book together. And I had not collaborated with anybody before. I tried to and maybe not even tried to. I had two books that are a take on collaboration but aren't true collaboration. So I have a book called Unfinished where I asked like 15 writers for a story that they had not finished. Like it was just sitting in their unfinished pile and I finished it for them. And then I have another book called The Mute Kids where I asked 150 or 160 writers for a sentence or a stanza that I rewrote into a piece of like flash fiction. But those are still at the end of the day my words, right? Like somebody gave me their words and I made them mine. But with this book, this is true collaboration.

So, you know, V would write a sentence, then I wrote a sentence, and then she would write a sentence, and then I would write a sentence. And so when we first began collaborating, we were collaborating in English only. I think that makes sense because we both write in English. That is our language that we write things in. And she has done a ton of collaboration. This worked for her with all of these other people. It wasn't working for us. I feel like we were doing things that were just very different from each other, even though we're both experimental writers. I think our types of experimentation were just perhaps incompatible at the beginning. And so we stopped collaborating. And I was busy at the time. was directing an MFA program. And then a few years later, we tried again. And I was at that point taking Vietnamese lessons from one of my graduate students. And I was learning how to read and write. And there was this one particular thing that I was really excited about. It was about ink and the word for ink and the word for octopus and the word for gallbladder were all the same basic word. And all of a sudden we started trying to write and we put Vietnamese in and it just worked and everything, it clicked. And it was like, this is what was missing, another language, of course. And so we started just writing these stories in half Vietnamese, half English, so Vietlish

And initially we were not going to provide any translations. We were just going to put the two languages in as one. And if you understood it, you understood it. And then at some point we're like, maybe we should put in a glossary so that the reader knows what these Vietnamese words are. And then it went from there to, *well, maybe we should translate the whole thing into English. Wait, maybe we should have the whole thing in Vietnamese.* And we ended up doing so much work.

And so V was born in Vietnam and grew up there. But I was born in the United States. Like my Vietnamese is very much so a Vietnamese-American Vietnamese. And I only learned how to read and write maybe a year before I started writing this book. And so the language was really difficult. Trying to translate the whole thing into Vietnamese was like impossible labor. At one point, we began with an hour a day, seven days a week. And then it was two hours a day, seven days a week. And then it was like more than two hours a day, seven days a week. And in the middle of this, you know, my mother died and we still collaborated. V, they found a hole in her heart and she had to have open heart surgery and she took a week off and we were collaborating after a week again. We were so serious about this. And yeah, it took a lot of work, but I don't know. I haven't seen another book like this. I haven't seen another writer do something like this. And I think that there is a recognition that we were doing something that was just new and in that way important and worthwhile. And so we put it all in there.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
Wow, I love that. Yeah, it was such an incredible and interesting read and like the reviews that we've gotten once you put in the work, like it's really worth it. And I definitely agree. And I

haven't seen anything like this either. Like obviously there's a lot of bilingual books out there. There's some with kind of a combination of two languages that provide a glossary, but having all of it in each kind of interpretive language and seeing how the story is kind of changed depending on what language it's in is so, so interesting. And so I'm glad that you and V were able to kind of work that out and find that magic to collaborate and bring this to fruition. That was really interesting to hear.

So we only have about two questions left, so let's zoom out a bit. What's your favorite thing that you've learned on your journey as a writer? It could be something about the craft of writing, the road to publication, something about yourself, anything.

AIMEE LIU:
I was thinking about this over Valentine's Day because I have a little group for my substack and we get together and we happen to meet on Valentine's Day and we were talking about the role of love in writing and it's not something that I really thought about for a very long time. It's only relatively recent that I've recognized how absolutely vital a component love is in writing, that you really need to love all your characters, even if they're horrible characters. You as the writer have to totally love them or love something about them or be fascinated by them. And so as we were talking the other day, I thought that fascination is a form of love. Hate is a form of love.

The opposite of love, as has been said many times, is not hate, but indifference. You cannot write something that you're indifferent about, that you don't care about. That is the curse that brings writing down.

I used to write these how-to books, and they were truly cursed writing projects because I would be interested enough when I put the book together, but once I got into the writing of it, I really didn't care about any of it. And that was when those projects died for me. I would pull them off, but I didn't love or care about them. And so I really try and think about that all the time in new work, even in the books I'm ghostwriting. If I don't love it enough to be interested in it and to really want to dive and dig deep in it. I should find a different way in, a different focus. And that applies to nonfiction and fiction equally. I really do feel that. So that's probably been one of the biggest epiphanies for me. And it translates because the thing that agents and editors always say when they're turning your work down is, *it was really great. It had a lot of wonderful qualities. I just didn't love it enough to take it on. I*nvest the time that I need to put into bringing it out into the world. So if you don't love it, then you can't really expect anybody else to love it. And that goes to every part of the book and every part of the process.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
That makes a lot of sense and I love that. Pete, what do you think?

PETE HSU:
Wow, Amy, that's a great answer. I feel like I can't really top that. I've thought similar things along those lines. Recently, I've been thinking, as probably all of us have, what happens if AI is able to write high quality and sellable novels that can compete with us, things that take us one to 10 years to write that can be written in one day of crafting a prompt and then plugging it in. And then what? What am I doing at that point? It's a soul searching moment, but I think it was really useful to think about it because it kind of boils down to what Amy's talking about, like the love of it. A way of articulating it to myself, I was thinking about it in terms of *what am I doing this for? What am I getting out of this? And what am I getting out of this that I can't get through any other form or direction?* I think it's just like discovering what it is ultimately that I have to make.

Like this thing that I can only discover through this long and difficult process. There's no shortcut to it. Even if I could create a better book or a more profitable book instantaneously, it wouldn't really be the thing that was unearthed from within me that I didn't know before. And also wouldn't give me that sense of knowledge about myself that I could only gain through thousands of hours spent in that world, whether on the computer or in my mind or in my dreams, you know.

So those are the deeper permanent valuable things that I've gotten from writing that I'll still always have, even if the commercial aspect of it completely evaporates, which I'm hopeful it doesn't, but even so, I think those things are so valuable and I wouldn't trade it for anything else.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
The threat of AI to the book industry, it feels pretty dire, but I think it's exactly like how you said. I think people will always be seeking out authentic work, work that really kind of a soul was put into it. And I'm hoping that's the true reason why people read books and seek out stories. While AI can put out all this profitable stuff. Hopefully the readers will let the industry know, as most everybody has let the art industry know. AI-generated stuff is not worth consuming. It has to be made by a person with a soul. I love kind of taking the love of the craft. Everything that you're going to learn about yourself and the characters and the stories that you're writing, that's such an important kind of thing to take with you. Lily, how about you?

LILY HOANG:
I agree with everything that Amy and Pete have said. Something that I've learned about writing is just how deeply emotional it is. There's no substituting it, there's no shortcutting it either. It's a big labor. It's also a magical, wonderful experience when it's going well and even when it's not going well. It's still a magical, wonderful experience. It's like very frustrating, but we're making something. And I think that knowledge always kind of makes it worthwhile. There's something about creating that is just so special.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
This has been such an incredible conversation. I want to close it out by asking what you're each working on next and where our listeners can find you online. Pete, I know you're working on a Western, which I cannot wait to read. Is there anything else that's kind of forthcoming sooner?

PETE HSU:
The Western is the thing that's the closest to being in the world. And you can find me, I'm pretty much only on Instagram. It's just Pete Hsu @pete.hsu. That's it. But thank you, Monica. This has been a total delight and happy to do it with you.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
Thank you.
Amy.

AIMEE LIU:
Well, I am bound and determined to finish this collection of essays that I've been working on for well over 10 years. And they're starting to get placed in some pretty good literary journals. And so I'm refining them through that process. And I only have two more that I need to revise and get into the world. And the book that I've just finished ghost writing is about to come out in a couple months. So I have a window here when I'm not doing that. The only other thing that really eats up my life these days is my substack, which is MFA lore. And I publish three times a week on that. So, those are, you know, craft essays and writing and writing prompts. It's a wonderful diversion from my own work. I just, really, love writing on Substack. It's like a game and it's a community and it's really the most wonderful excuse in the world not to focus on my own work.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
That's amazing. Three times a week on Substack is crazy. I commend you for that. Finally, Lily.

LILY HOANG:
I am revising a sci-fi novel that I've been working on for a while. The book takes place in 2050, but in 2024, I've changed things around. I'll give you the old pitch and then know that this is completely different now, but in the version that people did not want. Trump had won re-election and as his penultimate act as president of the United States, he created the Mothers for America program, the MFA program. And in it, he offered poor women the opportunity to be surrogate mothers to aborted fetuses. And these aborted fetuses would be born and they would be the property of the US government. They would all be named Sam. would grow up in camps and be At 18, they would be America's literal avant-garde, bodies to be shot at in our wars. And so then the book takes place 50 years later as many generations of Sams have come into the world and we're on the precipice of war. It is the three major superpowers are the United States, of course,

the MK, which is the Middle Kingdom, which is China. taken over all of Asia. And the RSSR, the Reunited Soviet States of Russia, is taken over all of Europe.

Now I'm revising everything and rethinking it all and like moving the timelines and moving power around. It's really, really dark, but also, yeah, just really dark. That's it. There's no fun side. And yes, I am on all of the social medias. You can find me there.

MONICA FERNANDEZ:
Amazing. Thank you so much, Lily. All right, that concludes our time together. So thank you so much again for joining me, Amy, Lily, and Pete. And thank you, the listener, for hanging out with us. You can find all of our guest's books wherever books are sold. And we encourage you to support your local independent bookstores and libraries by looking there first. We have an incredible season ahead of us, so stay tuned each month for new episodes of Red Hen Radio. Until then, let us know what else you want to know or hear on the show.

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