

OBITUARY

# Canadian author Wayson Choy inspired others with tales of childhood in Chinatown

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Author and Giller Prize Nominee Wayson Choy makes his way into the 11th Annual Giller Prize in Toronto on Nov. 11, 2004.

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In 1995, when Canadian literature felt very white, Wayson Choy published a novel that was not only an exceptional piece of writing, but one that depicted a family that many readers recognized: new Canadians, non-white, living in the inner city, dealing with racism and struggling to balance tradition with hopes for a more modern life in the New World. The Jade Peony, the story of a family in Vancouver's Chinatown during the 1930s and 40s, told from the perspectives of three different children, was a critical and commercial success and led the way for many other Asian-Canadian artists.

"Something that seemed very familiar opened up a world of possibility for me," says Jen Sookfong Lee, who read the book in her teens and is now a novelist. "Without him, there's no me. There's no [author] Lindsay Wong. There's none of us."

"That book broke such ground and made a community seen and heard and understood," says Martha Kanya-Forstner, editor-in-chief, Doubleday Canada and McClelland & Stewart. She adds that Mr. Choy was hugely supportive of other writers. "I never knew him not to offer a blurb or not to go to someone's reading or to champion someone's work. Now there are generations of writers that will be able to trace something back to an act of kindness on Wayson's part."

Mr. Choy was gay and also a role model for LGBTQ artists.

"I felt really connected to his stories about queer identity," says Yilin Wang, an MFA creative writing student at University of British Columbia. "That intersectionality is very



important because there are very few queer male Chinese-Canadian writers that I can think of.”

Mr. Choy, who was 56 when his first book was published, was generous in every way – with his time, his brain, his gifts. He operated in the contemporary world but was shaped by his heritage.

“He was born in Canada, but he had a Chinese accent,” says his friend Joseph Kertes. “The culture was very ingrained in him.”

He believed in luck and signs; ghosts had been visiting him since he was four years old, he wrote in his first memoir *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood*.

Mr. Choy had a rich family life but one that was anything but traditional. He did not marry or have children. But long before people spoke of chosen families, Mr. Choy selected his own, living with two families – one in Caledon, Ont., then one in Toronto – in houses they co-owned. He was godfather to their children and had a rich circle of friends around him.

As he told *The Globe and Mail* in 2009, “Truly, family is who loves you.”

On Sunday, eight days after he turned 80, Mr. Choy died after suffering cardiac arrest at the Toronto home he shared with Marie and Karl Schweishelm.

It was what he might have called a lucky death – quick and painless. “There wasn’t even a sound. That’s how fast it was,” Ms. Schweishelm says. “If you love somebody, that’s what you’d wish for.”

Wayson Choy was born on April 20, 1939, in Vancouver. His parents, Lilly Choy and Toy Choy (Nellie Hop Wah and Yip Doy Choy), whom he found out much later had adopted him, immigrated separately from China. “In 1917, two hours after he got off the boat from Hong Kong, my father was called [a racial epithet] and told to go back to China,” Mr. Choy wrote in an essay in *The Globe and Mail* in 1997. Wayson was their only child.

He grew up in Vancouver’s Chinatown, where teenagers “felt we didn’t quite belong in any one world,” he wrote in that essay. “We looked Chinese, but thought and behaved North American.”

In 1962, after graduating from the UBC, he hitchhiked to Ottawa to attend a civil rights protest, inspired by Martin Luther King Jr. Ontario became home. After working in advertising, he found his true calling – as a teacher.

“He really got what good teaching was, what students really needed,” says Mr. Kertes, who founded the creative writing program at Humber College. “He saw things from the students’ point of view. So he was a great leader.” Mr. Choy taught at Humber for more than 25 years.

Mr. Choy was also involved in theatre. In 1991, as board president of Cahoots Theatre, which develops and presents culturally inclusive work, he recruited Jean Yoon and Lynda Hill to be co-artistic directors. The company was \$27,000 in debt, Ms. Yoon recalls. Mr. Choy had a vision to develop new work, and was a tireless fundraiser. “He sold more raffle tickets than all of us combined,” says Ms. Yoon, who credits Mr. Choy with kick-starting many careers.

“He was a daddy of the whole Asian arts community. He was our grandpa. He was our Buddha,” says Ms. Yoon, who now stars in *Kim’s Convenience*. “He was our spiritual leader.”

In the midst of this, Mr. Choy applied for a grant from the Toronto Arts Council to help him write a book.

Back in 1977, he wrote a short story, *The Jade Peony*, during a creative writing course at UBC taught by Carol Shields. “She was the one who encouraged him to write more,” says Denise Bukowski, his long-time agent. The story was published in the *UBC Alumni Chronicle* in 1979 (and has since been anthologized more than 20 times).

The story eventually caught the attention of Vancouver-based publisher Douglas & McIntyre, which approached Mr. Choy about writing a collection of short stories. D&M recommended Mr. Choy get himself an agent, sent him suggestions, and Mr. Choy selected Ms. Bukowski.

“It will be a much bigger hit if you make it a novel,” she told him. “And it was.”

*The Jade Peony* was on the *Globe and Mail* bestsellers list for half a year, it won the Trillium Award (co-winning with Margaret Atwood), and the City of Vancouver Book Award.

In 1995, while on tour promoting the novel, Mr. Choy received a mysterious phone call and learned an astonishing fact about his own life: He had been adopted. He wrote about this revelation in *Paper Shadows*, published in 1999. It was shortlisted for numerous awards and won the Edna Staebler Prize for Creative Non-Fiction.

His second novel, *All That Matters*, focused on one of the characters in *The Jade Peony*. Published in 2004, it also won the Trillium Prize and was shortlisted for the Giller Prize.

“Editing Wayson Choy I saw true genius at play and glimpsed into the wonders of the artistic process,” Ms. Kanya-Forstner wrote in an email to Penguin Random House Canada staff.

He wrote that book despite severe health problems. In 2001, Mr. Choy suffered a heart attack brought on by an asthma attack. Four years later, he had a second heart-related brush with death. This was the subject of what would be his final published book, *Not Yet: A Memoir of Living and Almost Dying*.

In that 2009 book, he wrote about hearing his ancestors' voices warning him that without a wife, he would die alone.

Mr. Choy most certainly did not have a wife. Or a husband. "Gay or straight, he would have been a bachelor," Ms. Schweishelm says. "He really truly was bachelor material."

But he was not alone; not even close. In addition to his many friends, he had two families.

First there was his country family: Gary and Jean Noseworthy and their children Gary and Tosh, with whom he lived with in rural Ontario, first in Durham, later in Caledon. In kindergarten, Gary Jr. catalogued his family members: "I got a sister, a mommy and daddy, and a Wayson."

Later, Mr. Choy, co-bought a house in Toronto with his former student and close friend Karl Schweishelm and his wife, Marie. When their daughter Kathryn (Kate) was 5, she drew a family portrait that included Mr. Choy. "WAYSON," she had written in capital letters. "DADDY 2." They later bought a second house together, and moved there.

"We were just one big extended family; it may not have been the traditional way or by blood, but that's how we all saw each other," Ms. Schweishelm says.

He always made time for fans – and other writers.

Ms. Lee first met him when he attended her reading at the Sunshine Coast Festival of the Written Arts.

"When I was signing books, he came up to me and told me I'd done a good job and he was very proud of me." Later he sent her an email telling her why he liked the book. "And he did that for every single one of my books over the years."

In 2005, he was named to the Order of Canada. In 2015, he received the George Woodcock Lifetime Achievement Award for an outstanding literary career in B.C. In Vancouver's Chinatown, you will find plaques with a passage from *The Jade Peony* – one in English, one in Mandarin.

In addition to books, collecting things and people, Mr. Choy also loved food.

"He just loved meat. I know that Wayson has a reputation as a very gentle, kind, soft-spoken man but boy oh boy when it came to eating, he ate like a caveman," says Judy Fong Bates, who recalls bringing Chinese soups to the hospital for him, where he would devour them.

He was a regular at Pearl Court in Toronto's Chinatown East, often dining with friends – sometimes bringing along rave reviews of their books. But on other occasions he would sit alone with a book or notepad. If he didn't have time to linger, he would apologize to the staff for not being able to sit and enjoy their food.

“Some days we saw him with a cane and noticeably unwell but he still tried to crack a smile when he greeted us before ordering,” server Anna Wong says. “He was such a humble man.”

Mr. Choy’s health declined in recent years; his asthma was particularly bad over the winter. He was also in the early stages of vascular dementia.

“We all knew that it was not going to get better for him and in that way I’m really grateful,” his friend Beth Kaplan says. “There was terrible concern about what would happen if the memory loss got worse.”

Mr. Choy was able to mark his 80th birthday with friends; more celebrations were planned, including a gathering on Sunday, the day he died. They were roasting prime rib – one of Mr. Choy’s favourites. On Saturday night, he had a steak dinner – another favourite – at home, prepared by Mr. Schweishelm.

“He would have liked that, going out on a steak dinner,” Ms. Schweishelm says. “Life was a banquet to Wayson.”

Mr. Choy leaves his two families, including his godchildren Gary, Tosh and Kate. A private funeral will be held, followed by a public memorial in the fall.