

An award-winning author looks back at her life as a sex worker

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- Title: *Mistakes to Run With*
- Author: Yasuko Thanh
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In the fall of 2016, Yasuko Thanh was awarded the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize for her debut novel, *Mysterious Fragrance of the Yellow Mountains*. Less than six months earlier, she had been admitted for a stay at a psychiatric ward, and now she was staying in a Toronto hotel, the recipient of one of the most prestigious literary awards in the country. The celebrated author had lived through that and so much more, and not long after the ceremony she began work on a memoir documenting a life of survival.

The result is *Mistakes To Run With*, a sweeping – and, at times, harrowing – recollection of Thanh's journey to high-profile literary success. The book chronicles her early childhood rebellion as a runaway in Victoria, and traces her path to sex work on the streets of Vancouver. It details her tumultuous relationship with the pimp she fell in love with, her work in and then outside of the sex trade and, ultimately, her return to school to study fiction at the age of 34.

This gutting story is told with a novelist's affection for language, but also with distinctive clarity (and at times, even cold distance), making it all the more affecting. Over decades, Thanh endures myriad struggles, faces terrifying violence, ends up on the street, in jail and in destructive relationships. She becomes a busker, a world traveller, a wife, a mother, a student and an award-winning short-story writer. She does drugs and deals drugs, grapples with self-harm and mental-health issues, steals and works a varied list of jobs to get by, building a life for her and her family through strength and resilience.

"What I know now and didn't know then was that true change comes from that little fire within us," she writes. "... true change means we're no longer mutable from the outside, staying ourselves no matter what the weather. Less like clay, more like bamboo, swaying, not breaking, in a stiff wind."

Throughout all this upheaval, Thanh is able to find solace in her writing, a beloved companion that follows her through every phase: "Trying to write my way out felt like turning off one light while turning on another." She keeps journals, writes stories, submits articles, each word

providing the fuel that sustains her. Even in the darkest moments, she prioritizes and commits herself to it entirely, like an anchor to tether her to her sense of self.

Ultimately this is a book about self-actualization and personal transformation, but it transcends the shallow trappings of the standard inspirational memoir. There are no easy answers or tidy conclusions offered up here. There is no claim that literary success will act as salvation, that an award, a phone call from a top agent or a book deal will heal you. “That discipline, tenacity, ambition, talent, resourcefulness and hard work were no guarantee of success.” Despite the unshakable love she has for her children, and the warmth in which she writes about them, there is no false assertion that motherhood is a solution. Even the act of writing, the constant that has served her through so much, can’t offer rescue in the end.

Instead, Thanh inspires by giving us the true richness, complexity and messiness of the human experience, leaving nothing out for the sake of narrative construction, manufactured meaning or message. In sharing the full breadth of her life she proves that we are not stuck, that we are not mired in our past, that we can and do reinvent ourselves over and over again. We are many things, and we will be many more. We can construct a life with what we’ve been given, and despite what has been taken away.

On rare occasions, you read a book that gives you the sense it had to be written, that the impulse to get these words on the page was more about necessity than choice. Books such as those are full of passion, pain and urgency, and offer the kind of triumph you feel lucky to witness. *Mistakes to Run With* is one such book – it feels driven by the compulsion to document, by the urgent human desire to be heard. And when every detail has been shared, every unvarnished truth thoughtfully relayed, Thanh makes you want to stand up and cheer the accomplishment.