

→ *Your book's title story, "Floating Like the Dead," is about the D'Arcy Island leper colony. Why did you write about that?* I heard about the leper colony from a friend. The fact that I didn't know of its existence, yet grew up in Victoria, startled me. That, coupled with the fact that I tried to find more information and couldn't. I wondered how such a dramatic part of our history hadn't become part of the official record.

→ *How did winning the \$10,000 Journey Prize in 2009 for that story change your life?* I got an agent and a publication offer from McClelland & Stewart. I think people take you more seriously as a writer if you can add in your cover letter that you've won the Journey Prize. Maybe they'll be more apt to look at your story as opposed to throwing you in the slush pile.

→ *Have you had a lot of rejection?* Oh my goodness, I have enough rejection letters to wallpaper this house. What kept me going? Maybe it's some kind of crazy compulsion. Whether or not I was sending stuff, I would always write.

→ *What are you working on now?* I'm having fun with short stories and I'm also working on another novel. This one is loosely based on the Hanoi poisoning plot — around 1910 there was a plot to poison all soldiers at a French garrison. I have a complete outline. I've always written intuitively, but for a novel, that's not efficient. You write 200 pages, only to discover that you should have started elsewhere.

→ *You play guitar in a rockabilly band, the Jukebox Jezebels. Where did you learn to play and when do you perform?* I probably learned most of my playing when I was busking in Vancouver, before my daughter Jet, 14 now, was born. I stopped busking when I was about five months pregnant. For awhile the Jukebox Jezebels were performing once a month but we've taken a break. We'll be back.

→ *Are many of the stories in Floating Like the Dead autobiographical?* Yes. "Her Vietnamese Boyfriend" is my German mother's and Vietnamese father's story. They were pen pals when she was working on a farm in Germany. In "The Peach Trees of Nhat Tan," according to a family legend of my father's, a potion was rubbed on a girl's face after she had fallen into a vat

of oil, but it wasn't as dramatic as my story. And I did bring down opium to Zipolite, Mexico.

→ *Talk about your time in Vancouver, living on the street?* I've been on my own since I was 15. I don't look back and think that time was terrible. That's a societal view and it's difficult to judge that culture by our own standards. Many of the people I knew are either dead or in jail or stuff like that. I was living on the Downtown East Side. I was doing the starving artist thing. Having children changed me hugely.

→ *As a writer, what's more valuable to you, imagination or observation?* I have no imagination. It's all observation, I think. Taking real people and writing a fictional story is maybe more about what you've learned about the human race just by being alive.

→ *What do your two daughters (Jet, 14, and Maisie, 8) think of your career?* They say, 'Momma, why do you always write such sad stories?' I say, 'That's not my intention to be sad. I want people to read them and feel inspired to keep on living.' The little one says: 'I'll write you a happy story and then you can put your name on it and you can sell it.' I say, 'That would be awesome.'

→ *How did you juggle being a writer and a mother?* It was very difficult. Whenever you're writing, you feel guilty. Whenever you're trying to be a good parent but not writing, you feel guilty. It's a bit easier now that they're in school. When they come home, it's "mommy time." I just stop work. At times, I've been too intense about the writing. The sky is not going to fall if I don't complete 5,000 words today.

→ *Tell us a secret about yourself.* I really like to play with my daughter's Barbies, Polly Pocket, Mr. Potato Head ... I didn't have a lot of toys growing up. I'll get right down on the carpet with her. We don't watch TV.

This interview has been condensed and edited.



YASUKO THANH, 41
VICTORIA AUTHOR AND MUSICIAN