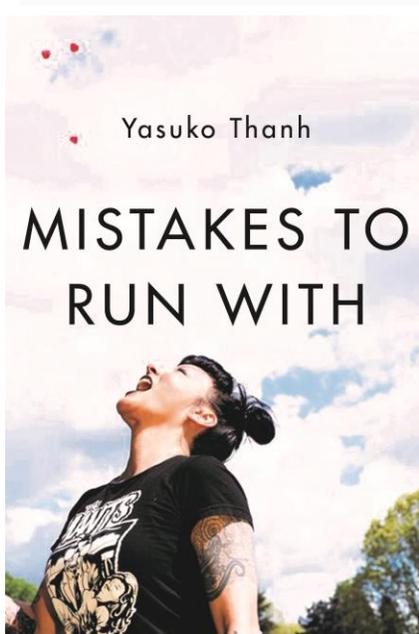


Yasuko Thanh's stunning memoir recounts life on Vancouver's mean streets

By [Sue Carter](#) Special to the Star
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Yasuko Thanh lives a few blocks away from the beach in Victoria, in a house that she observes is slowly transforming into a jungle. Among her eclectic second-hand furnishings, a growing collection of tropical plants thrives — not just because the house is blessed with beautiful light, but because Thanh treats her plants like sentient companions, talking and playing music to them. She calls her enthusiasm corny. But you can hear the joy when she speaks about those plants, and how they represent more than pretty windowsill decorations. It's a sign of feeling grounded.

Thanh's devotion to greenery is relatively new. First she discovered the calming, centring feeling of getting stoned and hanging outside in her garden. She connects it to her therapy and learning how to live more in the moment. "People have talked a lot about how being close to the earth is really good for that, but for me it was a fairly new discovery," she says.



Yasuko Thanh, author of *Mistakes to Run With*, Penguin Canada. (DON DENTON)

Mistakes to Run With, by Yasuko Thanh, Penguin Canada, 272 pages, \$24.95 (PENGUIN CANADA)



If Thanh was a plant, she would be one of those resilient species that can survive under any circumstances. In her stunning new memoir **Mistakes to Run With**, she describes a troubled early life marked by dramatic contradictions. How, as a preteen, she embraced the teachings of her parents' Pentecostal church, confident that Jesus would forgive her smoking, drinking and shoplifting. How she became an award-winning student, but then dropped out at 15, surviving on the streets as a sex worker and later selling drugs. How, despite her parents' emotional negligence during her own childhood, Thanh is now a devoted, nurturing mom to her own two kids.

Gleaming through the poverty, mental illness and an abusive relationship, there was always one constant in Thanh's life. She began writing her first novel at age 6, spurred by loneliness. She'd fill whatever scraps of papers were available with stories, though the dream of becoming a published writer was pushed far back. That life was for other people who attended the right universities, who studied literary theories.

Although Thanh eventually returned to school as a mature student, receiving her master's degree in creative writing from the University of Victoria, she would sometimes speculate what her work would have looked like if her personal life had been more stable. She realized that imagining the perfect circumstances was a waste of time, though she does fantasize about sequestering herself on a tiny island with no technology to distract, just writing, naps and maybe a freezer full of Pizza Pops to satiate her hunger.

"I felt like I'd been writing with fire in my belly for so long. But then you look at examples like *Star Wars* where they had every resource at their disposal and they still made totally crappy movies," Thanh says. "Art can be awful even when everything is perfect. You're never going to be able to make everything exactly the way you want it before you sit down. Because if you did, then you would never write anything."

In 2009, Thanh established herself as one of the country's most exciting new literary voices after winning the Journey Prize for "Floating Like the

Dead,” which would become the title story of her acclaimed debut collection, published in 2012. She followed up with her 2016 historical novel, *Mysterious Fragrance of the Yellow Mountains*, about a doctor who conspires to poison members of the French occupying forces in colonial Vietnam. While her novel was critically lauded, later taking home the prestigious Rogers Writers’ Trust Fiction Prize, Thanh’s memoir describes that time from a darker perspective. She recounts the breakup of her marriage, a crippling blood infection and a psychotic break that would land her in a Vancouver psychiatric ward.

Thanh has never hidden her background, though it often pops up in media interviews like a brisk side note. She’s played it down, in part because her agent, Denise Bukowski, advised her to get established as an author first. Bukowski is also the agent for Evelyn Lau, author of the 1989 memoir, *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*, and had observed how Lau’s writing had often been pigeonholed and her life sensationalized. She wanted to shield Thanh from the same fate.

While Thanh appreciates the protectiveness, she now feels confident and up for the challenges ahead. “There are a lot of issues that I wanted to speak about for a long time,” she says. “I feel like if you continue to hide, you’re playing right into the things that you’re trying to fight against, like the stigmatization and the stereotyping. Silence is really bad for that.”

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