

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Deborah and Joel Shlian, authors of *Rabbit in the Moon*

What inspired *Rabbit in the Moon*?

One of the main themes in *Rabbit in the Moon* is the search for the secret of longevity. For years, scientists around the world have been engaged in aging research. The idea that someone in China might have already discovered the elixir of life came as a result of our visit to a hospital in Xian. Although we were allowed to tour the facility, we were forbidden from entering one particular area. When we asked our guide to translate the name over the locked door, he said: "Longevity Institute." That then became the locked lab in our fictitious Xian Institute where Dr. Ni-Fu Cheng conducts his longevity research.

What is the significance of the title?

The rabbit in the moon is one of many Chinese symbols for longevity. According to Chinese folklore, there is a rabbit in the moon pounding on the elixir of life.

Start to finish, how long did it take to write *Rabbit in the Moon*?

Considering all the research we did beyond our travels, the novel took about five years working intermittently from the first nugget of an idea to the actual completion.

While the novel is set in China, it is resplendent with rich detail about the setting, traditions, and characters. Have you spent time in China?

Over the years we have traveled extensively throughout the Far East. In 1985 we spent a month in China and returned once again months before the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

What was the process of researching for *Rabbit in the Moon*?

Because the setting is international with a historical perspective, this novel required extensive research. We had traveled to every location in the story, so we had a strong sense of place. After returning from our first China trip, we became a host family for several native-born Chinese students at UCLA. Since one of the themes is the cultural difference between a native born Chinese (Chi-Wen) and an American born Chinese (Lili) we also interviewed several American born Chinese. We wanted the Chinese characters to be as believable and real as possible. Although *Rabbit in the Moon* is fictional, it is strongly rooted in fact. We read dozens of books and articles on China and Korea, as well as the latest genetic and pharmaceutical approaches to tackling the mystery of longevity so that every name, date, street name, historical and medical reference would be accurate.

How does your background as physicians impact your writing?

The fact that we are physicians has had an enormous influence on our fiction writing. Certainly we have developed medically-related themes in all three of our novels. Because we have had an opportunity to get to know so many different individuals over the years, to learn about their lives from a kind of intimate perspective that is quite unique, we have, between us, a breadth of experiences from which to draw our characters and situations.

What is the process of writing as a team?

This is the third novel we have written together, so we've had a chance to refine our process. Generally, we spend time incubating the idea, then developing and outlining the characters and plot together. Then Deborah sits down and writes the first draft. Joel is the better editor and gets to use his red pen to make modifications. The novel will go through several iterations before it is completed. Unlike our first book, in which each of us was wedded to our own words, we now understand that rewriting is critical to a good final product. So we don't take criticism personally. Besides, after we start living with our characters, they become so real that they "tell" us how they would behave in a particular situation. They usually have the last word!

How did you begin writing together?

We know we're an unusual couple. We've been total partners in almost everything we do since we married thirty-seven years ago (six weeks after we met). We're extremely lucky that our relationship seems to enhance the other rather than create conflict. For years before we started writing fiction, we worked together as physicians in the same multispecialty group. During that time we teamed up on several clinical research projects, which we published in scientific journals such as JAMA. We also co-wrote a consumer health guide for national Blue Cross/ Blue Shield. In 1988 we returned to school together. After completing the MBA program at UCLA, we became partners in a national health care consulting and recruiting business. When we had our first idea for a novel, it was only natural that we'd take on that challenge together as well.

How did you get the idea for the characters in *Rabbit in the Moon*? Are any of the characters based on people you know?

After our first visit to China, we became a host family for students from the Mainland who were studying at UCLA where we both taught medicine. Two of these students, Qing and Hao, were especially helpful in elucidating recent Chinese history and culture - especially the events surrounding both the Cultural Revolution and the student democracy uprising. Qing was a brilliant graduate student in mathematics when we first met him. A victim of the Cultural Revolution, he became the model for our main character Chi-Wen, Shanghai-born Hao, was an undergraduate at UCLA. A decade younger than Qing, he was the same age as many of the students participating in the democracy uprising in 1989. Hao became the model for our student leader, Zheng Tu.

Do any of the characters in *Rabbit in the Moon* have an autobiographical component?

Our novels seem to have strong female protagonists so there is probably a little of Deborah in each. Although we are extremely fond of all the main characters in *Rabbit in the Moon*, none are really autobiographical.

What do you think is Lili Quan's biggest strength? Weakness?

Lili's biggest strengths are her tenacity, her integrity, her sense of justice, and her passion. Her biggest weaknesses are her vulnerability and her insecurity.

How does Lili evolve in the course of the story?

Lili's journey in search of her past is a journey of self-discovery. The question of cultural identity is at the core of the story of this strong-willed young women who struggles with who she really is as an individual.

One of the major themes in your book is the issue of longevity. Is there a downside to a discovery that could help us live much, much longer?

Life expectancy rates in the US are at an all-time high with those born in 2005 projected to live until age 78 compared to an average lifespan of 47 for those born in 1900. Half of all people who ever lived to age 65 are alive today and by 2050, there will be 20 times as many centenarians (people over 100 years) as there were in 1999. The upside of these trends is more potential years of life. The downside is whether the additional years will be quality years. Even those lucky enough to remain healthy into a very old age may experience extreme loneliness as they see friends and family die. More than half of today's 74 million baby boomers are expected to live past age 85. However, many will suffer from chronic diseases. While death rates from heart disease, stroke and cancer are coming down, mortality from Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease continue to rise.

Will this shift towards an aging population with chronic disease affect the allocation of resources and tax dollars? Will more be spent on hip replacement and bypass surgery and Alzheimer's research and less on vaccinations, head start programs and education - potentially creating a struggle between generations as we see in *Rabbit in the Moon*? As Americans are living into their 80s, 90s, and beyond, the joys and complications of living longer will be felt not only by seniors, but also by their children, who often become their parent's caregivers. And we haven't even

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touched on the potential downside issues of overpopulation and use of resources globally. So, there is a lot to think about (upside and downside) as medicine makes the once-fantastic notion of living more than “4 score and 10” a real possibility.

What do you hope readers take away from *Rabbit in the Moon*?

We hope our readers will better appreciate the political and societal turmoil that has taken place in China in the late 20th century and the stark differences in ideology and politics between the generations. This understanding is all the more important since we have become increasingly more dependent on China as a source of financing our growing debt as well as a significant supplier of the products we buy. Additionally, China is a growing geopolitical force that will affect all Americans in the future. We also feel that as our society becomes older (centenarians are one of the fastest growing groups in America), there are myriad of issues (socioeconomic, political, etc) that need to be considered and discussed including the potential for generational conflicts as resources become strained. Of course, bottom line, we want readers to enjoy what we hope is an exciting, fast-paced international thriller and love story.

Can readers expect for any of the characters from *Rabbit in the Moon* to return?

As we observe the enormous changes that have taken place within China since 1989, we certainly wonder what Lili and Chi-Wen would think of these and what directions their lives have taken since the events surrounding Tiananmen. Almost every other day, we consider potential scenarios for a sequel, but we’re waiting for our characters to tell us which one is the right one.

Do you have any other novels in the works?

Deborah is just completing a mystery she co-wrote with a UCLA colleague about a less than ethical experiment conducted on a university campus. We are beginning to plot several new novel ideas – together.