

The first five pages: *Peach Blossom Spring*



Melissa Fu analyses the first five pages of her debut novel, which looks at 20th century Chinese history through the story of one family

1 'He is from walking and walking and walking.'

This line was always going to be the beginning of my novel, even before I knew it was a novel. The line came from a writing exercise I was leading in one of my workshops, based on a poem by George Ella Lyon called *Where I'm From*. The exercise is to finish the sentence 'I am from...' but in a metaphorical, not geographic, sense. For example, I told the participants, instead of saying 'I am from Los Alamos, New Mexico,' I might begin, 'I am from snow fall and leaf shadow, from hot bubbling tar on summer streets,' and go from there.

When they started to write, I picked up my pen, planning to carry on with my example. Instead, the line 'He is from walking and walking and walking' appeared the page. Intrigued, I continued: 'He is from shoes filled with holes, blistered toes and calloused heels that know the roughness of gravel roads and the relief in straw, in grass.' I wasn't expecting this. As I wrote, I knew I was drawing on a story my father had told me about his childhood, but I hadn't been intending to write about

him. Ah well, never mind intentions, this line had an urgency of its own and I followed it.

What I wrote from the exercise became the beginning of a short story about my father and his peach trees. But the story still didn't sufficiently address the imperative contained in that first line. I had to write bigger. I decided to let the story take me wherever it wanted to go. I committed to writing 80,000 words, the nominal length of a novel draft. Somehow, making that commitment was like firing a starting gun; the project took over my creative imagination and began galloping away. I held on tight and wrote and wrote. Not that everything flowed out easily from that point, but there was a momentum and sustained interest that I hadn't experienced before in any writing project. The writing evolved into a manuscript which brought me to my agent, a fellowship, research trips to China and Taiwan, and eventually, a book deal.


Throughout the entire drafting, revising and editing processes, the line 'He is from walking and walking and walking' stayed at the very

beginning of the manuscript. The section is called Origins, and the line itself became an origin, a starting point, for me.

1. 'Tell us, they say, tell us where you're from.'

Careful readers will note that the very first line is not the one about walking, but this: 'Tell us, they say, tell us where you're from.' Who is this 'they' and why do they keep popping up and asking for something else? Tell us where you're from, tell us your memories, tell us more, tell us a story. Insistent and affectionate, they serve to push the opening lines forward and give a sense of the story arc to come. These playful voices were the very last part I added to the final manuscript.

I guess it was a case where I had to write to the end to know how to frame the beginning. The 'they' are meant to evoke children, specifically grandchildren of the 'he' in the section. Their tone is that of children who know they can sweet-talk an elder. In their clear-eyed innocence, they can get away with asking the questions their parents might avoid. Without giving away any spoilers, I'd say that



they link to the final pages. While the book is mostly about three generations, I couldn't resist the opportunity to slip in a fourth generation, even if mainly through suggestion.

2. 'Dao Hongtse had three wives.'

Once I realised I was going to be writing not only about my father's peach trees, but about his life, I looked at the notes I had from the only day he had ever told us stories from his childhood. The first thing he said was, 'My grandfather had three wives.'

It always intrigued me that in order to tell us about his life, my father felt he had to back up two generations and start with his grandfather, filling in the family tree until he got to himself. I assumed this was a personal quirk. So, I nearly yelped in recognition when I read in Gish Jen's *Tiger Writing – Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self* that when her father was asked about his biography, he went back not just two generations, but 4,500 years, tracing their family ancestry back to the legendary emperor who founded Chinese civilisation! On reading more of her essay on the role of interdependence in Chinese culture, I came to appreciate the logic of both of our father's explanations. If you are asked who you are, the question is not about you, the individual, but about where you sit in the context of an extended, interdependent family. In a nod to this tradition, I decided to introduce my character Dao Renshu by funneling down from the family patriarch, Dao Hongtse.

3. 'Their names are not important.'

When I asked my father for the names of his grandfather's wives, he brushed the question aside, saying they weren't important. For a long time in China, it was not uncommon for women to be known primarily by their position in the family. Though they had names, they would more often be referred to by a title such as third wife, fourth sister, or sixth daughter.

It irked me that 'their names were not important.' Names are very important, not only in the novel, but in general.

I repeat the line 'their names are not important' in this early section, in part, to be a gadfly to make the reader want to challenge the assertion. I also repeat the line in hopes that the reader will pay extra attention to when the first female name appears in the story.

4. 'Though it is clear that he is her superior, both in age and position, there is an air of mutual respect.'

As we move away from the family tree, a dramatis personae of sorts, I imagine a curtain rising on a stage where we, the audience, look through the windows of a two-storey shop. We see two figures: a man and a woman in conversation. Before revealing who they are, I wanted their body language and interaction to suggest a relationship in which they hold one another in high regard.

We soon learn that the man is Dao Hongtse, the patriarch, and the woman is his daughter-in-law. Traditionally, as wife of the youngest son of the third wife, she would be among the lowest in the family household. But the spirit of appreciation, even good-will, between them indicates that she is remarkable and Hongtse recognises this. Herein lies a hint that this first female character does not follow all the rules and roles that might be expected.

5. 'He delivers news that illuminates her face.'

I wanted to catch the reader's curiosity here. What is the news? Why is she happy?

In writing a novel, achieving balance between pacing and character and plot within the first pages is a big challenge. With a historical novel, there is the added difficulty of providing enough context to establish a connection to a time and place that a reader may not know. Yet too much background weighs down the pages. I needed to drop the readers into the middle of China, during the Second-Sino-Japanese war and give them an immediate emotional investment.


This section was one of the most difficult to write. In the first draft, my editors and I agreed there was

not enough historical context. Then I overcorrected and there was too much. I drafted and redrafted this section, losing count of the many versions. Finally, after revising and editing the rest of the book, I found a way in. I needed to land the story early and with empathy via one character's perspective: Shui Meilin.

It is no accident that Meilin's is the first female name we learn. She will carry us through much of the book. Therefore, it is her concerns in which we are immersed. Her happy news is of a Chinese victory and the imminent return of her soldier husband. We learn of the war, not by a recounting of political viewpoints and military strategies, but by the way the turmoil touches Meilin's life: A husband gone to fight. Rising prices and shortages in the market as supply chains are disrupted. Refugees pouring into Changsha, crowding the city where she lives.

It is the everyday, the tangible, that hooks my interest when I'm trying to grasp an unfamiliar context. In hopes that it might be the same for my readers, I put us right by Meilin's side so that we could wonder at her changing world with her.

6. 'Meilin's thoughts are interrupted by shrieking and giggling, followed by the sound of footsteps running across the courtyard.'

But Meilin is a young mother, and young mothers rarely have much time for quiet reflection. Our reverie is soon broken by the shouts, laughter, and the approach of Meilin's son, Renshu, and his beloved cousin, Liling. They tumble into the scene, bringing motion and commotion. Along with relationships, questions, context and character, a novel must have action. Above all, things must happen. And now, we are five pages in, the stage is set, and the characters have arrived. Let the story unfold. 

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Melissa Fu's debut novel, *Peach Blossom Spring* is published by Wildfire Books. Read her first five pages in full at <http://writ.rs/wmapr22>