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By Jamie Chang

Chang: You have shared with your readers that “Twenty” is autobiographical. Have the experiences of the period contributed to your writing?

Cheon: That is true. “Twenty” is, in part, an autobiographical story. The story depicts what was a difficult time for me, but writing about it made me look back on how I saw the world when I was young, so it was personally meaningful, too. I think the experiences of agony, failure, and isolation in that time paved the way for my perspective on the world as a writer.

Chang: Characters in your stories have a wide range of backgrounds and occupations. You said elsewhere that you worked in your twenties as an insurance salesman and a clerk at a golf accessories store, so I gather that working as a salesperson you interacted with many people from different backgrounds. I wonder how this has influenced your creative writing.

Cheon: My characters are rarely upper class or intellectuals. They are mostly quite ordinary people who are at the bottom rung of Korean society, and they might indeed be the people I have actually come across in my life. I am sure that these people have had impact on my writing.

AZALEA

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Chang: You were a screenwriter before you debuted as a fiction writer, and some of your screenplays became movies. There is a hint of screenwriting in your stories—the fast pace and true-to-life characters. Was the process of transitioning from screenwriter to fiction writer smooth, or did you have to put special effort into it?

Cheon: I got published just three months after I started writing a novel for the first time, so I have to say that there wasn't much of a training period for me. I created components of a story, such as characters, backgrounds, and events just as I did in screenwriting, and put them in prose form. This method surely must have been influenced by my screenwriting background.

Chang: All of your published works have enjoyed a great popular reception, most notably *The Whale*. It is hard to believe it took you only three months to write this novel, considering it is an epic encompassing three generations. Can you tell us how you got the idea for the novel?

Cheon: I initially wanted to make a movie with that storyline, but I couldn't find a film producer interested in a story about a female brick-maker weighing 260 pounds. That's why I had to write the story in the format of a novel. I already had the structure of the story laid out, so it didn't take me long to write it.

Chang: The main character in *My Uncle Bruce Lee* is the center of a turbulent “loser” saga, and we see this figure quite often in your work. Is there a particular reason you are drawn to these characters?

Cheon: I once said in an afterword to one of my novels that a novel, to me, is a story about failures. My sympathy is for the outcasts, the failures, and the left behind, probably because of the only sense of morals I have as a writer. I'm always drawn to stories of unlucky, foolish people who can't be saved rather than fabulous, successful ones. I honestly do not know how I ended up with this tendency.

Chang: You chose the story “Pink” to be included in *Azalea*, and you once said that you consider this the most ideal form of a story. Can you elaborate more?

Cheon: Personally, I am very interested in genre fiction. “Pink” is short, but it has elements of crime fiction that I have long been a fan of—thrilling scenes, hard-boiled dialogue, lonely characters, and abrupt twists.

Chang: Your recent novel, *This Is a Man’s World*, was run serially on the Kakao webpage. How would you characterize the experience of writing and publishing through the new medium of the Internet?

Cheon: I was able to meet a new kind of audience, different from book readers, and it was a fun encounter for me to see how this new, unfamiliar audience responds. But of course, it was almost impossible to cater to their every taste.

Chang: You directed the film based on Kim Eonsu’s novel *Hot Blood*. You said in an interview that the three things you really loved and wanted to be good at were billiards, guitar, and movies, and you are finally going to be a film director. How does it feel?

Cheon: The directing job isn’t finalized yet. We are actually in the process of finding investors. I used to feel a bit stifled as a writer, so directing a film might be exciting new work for me. And of course, it’s been my lifelong dream. If that dream gets realized, it would be the oldest film director’s debut in Korea. The prime years for a debut passed long ago, so I feel a little sad, like the character Scar in *The Whale*, who got to hold an old, weary geisha in his arms.