

## **Review—Authored**

2002 | “A ‘Sacred Condition’: A Review of Li-Young Lee’s *Book of My Nights*.” *E3W Review of Books*. Ethnic and Third World Interest Group, The University of Texas at Austin (Spring).

**Li-Young Lee**  
***Book of My Nights***  
**Rochester, N.Y.: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2001.**  
**67 pages**  
**ISBN: 1-929-91808-9**  
**Price: \$12.95**

By Susan B.A. Somers-Willett

*Book of My Nights*, Li-Young Lee's highly-anticipated third volume of poetry, is the first book of Lee's verse to appear for over a decade. His other books of poetry, *Rose* (1986) and *The City in Which I Love You* (1990), also published by BOA, were widely received and helped Lee garner a Lannan Literary Award and a Guggenheim fellowship among other honors. Born in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1957 of Chinese parents, Lee spent the first five years of his life in various Southeast Asian nations. Lee's father spent a year as a political prisoner in Indonesia under President Sukarno for preaching Christianity. After his release in 1959, the Lee family relocated to Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan and emigrated to the U.S. in 1964, where his father, now deceased, was the pastor of a Presbyterian church in Pennsylvania. Lee has attended and taught at several institutions, although he now prefers handling boxes in a Chicago warehouse to teaching creative writing.

Lee's new collection retains a sense of intimacy, a connection to family, and a meditative quietness that characterizes his earlier work. However, *Book of My Nights* is a bit of a departure from Lee's previous verse; these

poems are shorter and more economic with their language. *Book's* poems are loosely organized between the periods of dusk and morning, and they explore the restless, liminal spaces of dream and sleeplessness (Lee is a self-proclaimed insomniac). The collection is, most prominently, a spiritual exploration. In a recent interview in *Poets & Writers*, Lee remarked, "Every poem is a descendant of God...The writing of a poem is the uncovering of language to its sacred condition." Night is figured in this new collection as place of spiritual questioning and affirmation, as Lee asks in his first poem, "Pillow": "Night is the shadow of my father's hands / setting the clock for resurrection. / Or is it the clock unraveled, the numbers flown?" Lee's own religious beliefs are more Taoist than Christian, although the legacy of his parents' beliefs are evident in his work.

The family figures prominently in *Book of My Nights* as a place where personal and spiritual concerns meet. But where his previous family-oriented work has been predominately focused on his parents (particularly his father) this new collection reflects Lee himself as a father of two sons. Perhaps as a corollary, some of Lee's verse contemplates his own eventual death alongside his father's memory. He is a man occupying two modes of life—as both son and father—as expressed in this excerpt from "Words for Worry":

Another word for *father* is *worry*.

Worry boils water  
for tea in the middle of the night.

Worry trimmed the child's nails before  
singing him to sleep.

Another word for *son* is *delight*,  
another word, *hidden*.

And another is *One-Who-Goes-Away*.  
Yet another, *One-Who>Returns*.

So many words for son:  
*He-Dreams-for-All-Our-Sakes*.  
*His-Play-Vouchsafes-Our-Winter-Share*.  
*His-Dispersal-Wins-the-Birds*.

But only one word for *father*.  
And sometimes a man is both.  
Which is to say sometimes a man  
manifests mysteries beyond  
his own understanding.

This sense of "inbetween-ness" resonates with the cultural journey of the Lee family's three generations from Asia to America. Overall, *Book of My Nights* offers us a portrait of an Asian American poet in his middle years, of a man searching for the "sacred condition" of his inseparable spiritual, cultural, and familial beginnings and ends.



**Salman Rushdie**

*Fury*

New York: Random House, 4 September 2001.

259 pages

ISBN: 0-679-46333-X

Price: \$24.95 (hardcover)

By Neelum Wadhvani

*I believe that whenever literature and art are good and great they leap over narrow group barriers and periods to make a universal appeal. . . I don't minimize the danger of obstruction of talent and the destruction of art. But if the works are authentic they will eventually survive the noise and racket of the times, I think.*

-Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home*

Add reviewers to the groups of people Salman Rushdie has upset. There is more resentful disdain *cum* fury leaping from the reviewers' pens than from Rushdie's characters. *Fury* is somewhat of a departure from Rushdie's typical fare and the critics aren't having it. The reviewer for *The Economist* wrote: "If 'Fury' is Mr. Rushdie's bid to write a Great American Novel, he has been brought low in the attempt." *The New York Times* dismissed the novel as implausible and riddled with "false observation(s)." Many others complain that the threads of the story are not tied together seamlessly enough, if at all.

*Fury* is a shift from Rushdie's previous novels. Probably the largest (and most pleasant) surprise is the choice of the third person narrative—a significant departure from Rushdie's normal story telling, which employs the first person perspective. Secondly, the center here has