



“There is loft; there is flight; there is the strange lightness of being”: an interview with Linda Watanabe McFerrin

POSTED ON SEPTEMBER 3, 2019

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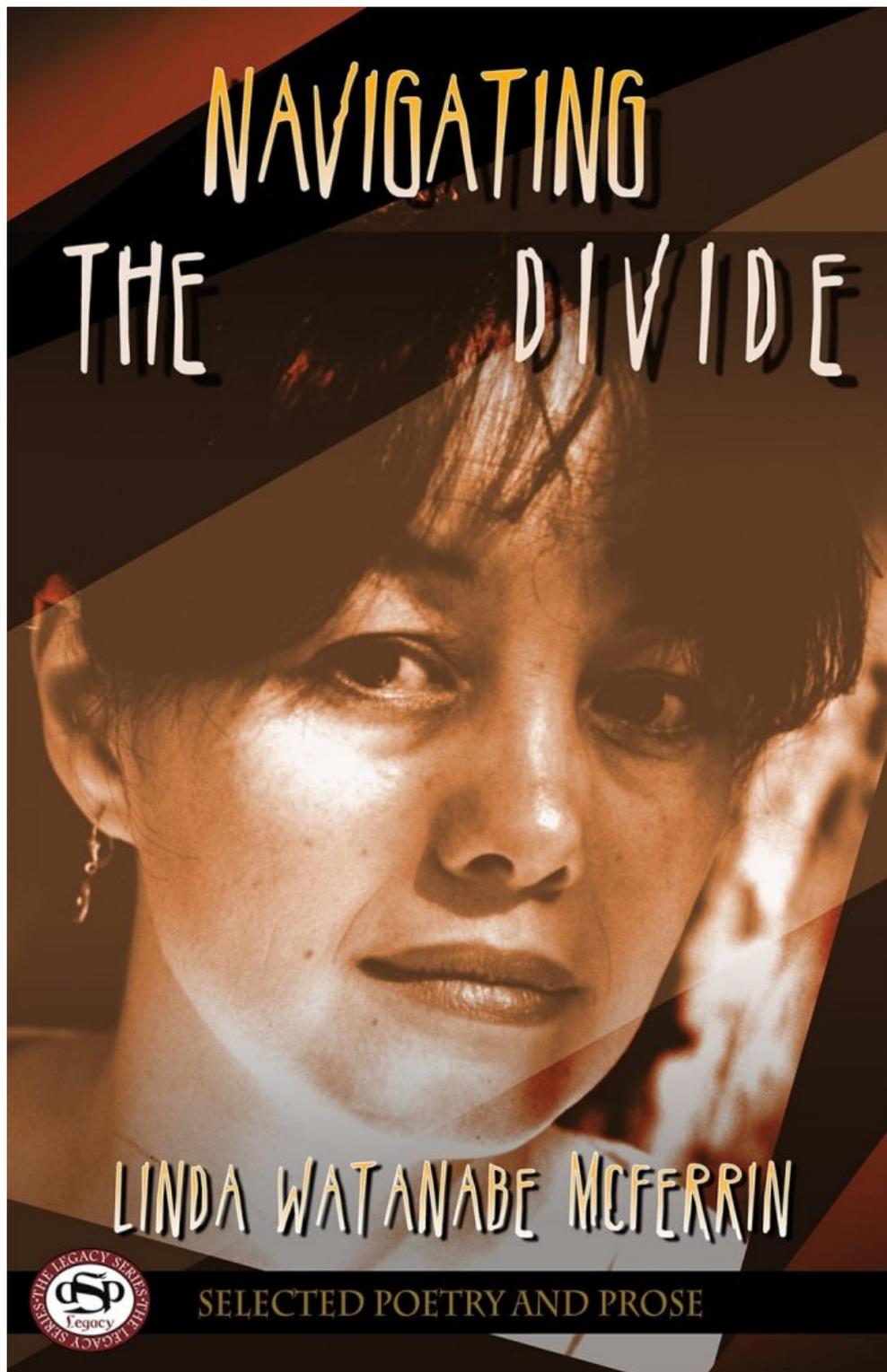
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INTERVIEW BY LELAND CHEUK

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Since the 1990s, Linda Watanabe McFerrin has been a voice for those caught between cultures and genres. Her best-known works are the novel *Namako: Sea Cucumber* (1998) and the story collection *The Hand of Buddha* (2000), both published by Coffee House Press, but McFerrin is also an award-winning poet and travel writer. Her body of work is collected in *Navigating the Divide*, as part of Alan Squire Publishing’s Legacy Series, which is devoted to publishing career-spanning collections from independent press authors. I had the privilege of interviewing McFerrin over email, after reading this category-defying collection.

Leland Cheuk: I was so impressed with not just the array of poetry and prose in *Navigating the Divide*, but also the arrangement of the pieces. Though we were just getting snippets of your longer works of prose, broken up by poetry and travel writing, there’s a narrative build for the reader from beginning to end. What was your thinking as you chose the order of the pieces?

Linda Watanabe McFerrin: Although it is not arranged by genre or chronology, *Navigating the Divide* does cohere in a narrative way. True, it is built from pieces pulled from work written at different times and in various genres. In that way it is an abstract construction, but the bits are all from one source, a single worldview. So it’s my world—the traveler’s world, the outsider’s world—arranged with a narrative arc or a “story.” The through line is an emotional one, and it escalates. For me, it has to begin with the story goal, with “Love.” In subsequent sections, the terrain becomes trickier, the footing less sound. In the final section, the reader is on

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the edge, and all I need to do is to give a little push into the surreal, which is actually a relief, I think, after “Death and Shadow.” There is loft; there is flight; there is the strange lightness of being that comes with acceptance and escape.

LC: Your pieces seem concerned with bridging the proverbial gap between Japanese and American cultures, but also with bridging the gaps between reality and surreality, life and death, and genres: fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. What’s driving your desire to write about the in-between spaces and categories?

LWMC: The world I grew up in was quite multicultural and far-flung. I was raised in the U.S., in England, and in Japan. Family and friends came from many cultures, and we had quite a few writers and storytellers among them. Our house was sometimes a caravansary and our bookshelves—full of diversity, full of photo albums, magazines like *National Geographic* and books by writers like Paul Theroux, William Burroughs, and Walt Whitman—just another prompt toward exploration. I was constantly trying to find a way to integrate all of this. I’ve always used my work to create a personal path into and through it all.

LC: There’s a lot of attention to diversity in publishing today and many, many more authors of color are being introduced to American readers. Many are writing about some of the identity issues you’ve written about over the course of your writing life. What do you think of today’s writing about identity in America? Are we just covering the same ground or are we making actual progress?

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LWMC: I love the fluidity; that this cultural business is not settled; that we seem to recognize what's "in the circle" and what's "out" and that it is necessary for this to constantly change; that we are not forced to identify in a predetermined and constrained fashion; that we can create our own identities and stretch the "definitions" that limit our understanding. I think we are beginning to realize that by embracing the outsiders, we grow the collective. That it is a topic of discussion and a point of contention is progress.

LC: I loved the poem "Legacy" in which you write: "I've thrown out the kimonos, the costumes and robes / I've made a new self out of flowers and surgical steel / a shiny new self that blooms every spring / And I've cast all the ancestors / back over the sea". Have you felt constrained by your heritage in your writing (or in the publishing of or reception to your work)?

LWMC: I've never felt constrained by my heritage in my work. Maybe I have been constrained by my heritage in life, where I've danced the outsider's dance, but not in my work, which is a record and release of that dance. In my work, I've always felt inspired by my heritage, challenged by it, sometimes confounded by it. It's the same relationship I've had with my family: It's part of me, not all of me, and I want to simultaneously accept and refuse it. I think it's that tension that fuels what I lay down on the page. I can use that. I wish I had that kind of control over my life. I don't. Others exert a certain power over outcomes in this world, and where that is the case—in publishing, for example—my heritage has worked to my disadvantage.

LC: You write beautifully about *kamis* (ghosts) in your novel *Namako: Sea Cucumber* and elsewhere in the book. Who are some of your literary *kamis*?

LWMC: I explain the concept of *kami* in a childish way as Ellen in *Namako*. The *kami* are Shinto gods or spirits that take the form of things important to our lives. There are supposedly millions of *kami*. Ellen tells her friend Anne, "Almost everything is a *kami*." So a *kami* is more a spirit than a ghost and that spirit can be found in the strangest places. Sometimes it finds its home in a being, but often it occupies some other aspect of the natural world. It's the vulnerability of a baby bird, the power of the wind, the ferocity of a tiger and so on. A tree, a shadow, a musical note, the paper that sits on my desktop—I guess I find my literary "kami" in everything—dark or light—that moves me.

LC: What I love about your travel writing in *Navigating the Divide* is that it's very experiential and doesn't read like glossy travel magazine writing. You're not the tour guide; you're open to wandering, meeting new people, experiencing the absurd. Where are you off to next and who are some of the travel writers that inspired you?

LWMC: I spent the first part of the year traveling in Hawaii, in France, in Greece. I'm off to Washington, D.C. next for the book launch. That's where my publisher is located. Then there is the tour. I'm not sure where that will lead me. It's an open road, isn't it? I hope I will do some more exploring of my own backyard, but overall, I think it will be a surprise. I

wish I could say I'm off to another swamp, another rainforest, another desert area, but I think I'll be hanging out in bookstores and libraries for a while ... which is fine with me; I love them. As for the writers who inspire me, they are, fortunately, all over the country and all over the world, and maybe on this tour I'll get to visit some of them. Let's see: Maureen and Tony Wheeler in Australia; David Downie in France; photographer and writer Alison Wright—along with so many other creative folk—in New York; Tim Cahill in Montana; Jan Morris in England; Paul Theroux in Hawaii; Haruki Murakami in Japan ... and so many great ones right here in my neighborhood.

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Linda Watanabe McFerrin is a poet, travel writer, and novelist. She is the author of two poetry collections, two novels, a collection of award-winning short stories, and a travel guidebook. Her literary honors include the Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction and various travel writing, poetry, and fiction awards. Her latest novel, *Dead Love* (Stone Bridge Press, 2009), was a Bram Stoker Award Finalist for Superior Achievement in a Novel. As the founder of Left Coast Writers, Watanabe McFerrin has taught and mentored a long list of writers and is a beloved figure in California's rich, historic literary culture. She has led workshops around the world, and with ASP author Joanna Biggar, she co-founded the Wanderland Writers series of workshops and anthologies, which they co-edit.

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