

## Optional Reading

*The New Yorker* - This Week in Fiction

### **Weike Wang on the Privilege of Not Having to Think About Race**

By Deborah Treisman - June 11, 2018

*In your story in this week's issue, "Omakase," a couple dine at a tiny Japanese omakase restaurant in Harlem and converse with the chef. Did you base the restaurant on a real place? How did the art of omakase lend itself to this particular narrative?*

I didn't base the story on a real place, but there are certainly sushi restaurants in Harlem. My first omakase experience was downtown at a restaurant called Domo Domo. It was refreshing to have a series of small dishes to taste. But Domo Domo also serves other things and is a big restaurant where customers are not seated near the chef. Afterward, my husband and I found a few other places that served only omakase, and we liked the experience of sitting at the bar, talking to those around us and, of course, the chef. Now there is a wonderful omakase place on Seventy-second and Broadway, which we have gone to a few too many times.

When I sat down to write the story, I knew that the entirety of the narrative would be set in the restaurant. Omakase usually doesn't take more than an hour and is a nice setup for conversation. Omakase also looks deceptively simple, but there is a lot going on in each piece. The rice has to be at a specific temperature. The fish, usually imported from Japan the day of, must be cut a certain way. And the chef can add more or less wasabi (always fresh and ground from the root in front of the guests), more or less sauce (ginger, ponzu, miso, etc.), more or less rice (cooked with a touch of vinegar), depending on the customer's preferences. The narrative I chose to write is meant to seem deceptively simple as well. A couple goes out to dinner and nothing really happens between them, except for a quarrel at the end, yet a lot has happened under the surface.

*The man is white and the woman, who is the daughter of Chinese immigrants, struggles to believe that his interest in her is not racially motivated. Why is that the fallback assumption for her? Does she discriminate against herself?*

Not having to think about one's race is, I believe, a privilege. This woman is more preoccupied with race than the man is, because race has permeated more aspects of her life. She is reminded by friends and family that, while she can do whatever she wants, she also cannot forget that she is Chinese. The friends and family believe that they are helping her by telling her a truth. And it is a truth—she is Chinese—but as a result and, for better or for worse, the woman has become incredibly skeptical of the world. The woman does not want to be made to look like a fool, so she assesses all possible reasons for the man's interest in her, starting with the most obvious and perhaps the most hurtful one. A friend of mine once told me that there was a reason he was always the first in the

room to bring up the smallness of his eyes. He did it so that no one else could beat him to punch and, as a result, hurt him more.

For the man in this story, the most obvious reason that he is interested in the woman is that he is interested in her. Race has nothing to do with it. For the woman, that statement—race has nothing to do with it—seems somewhat naïve or idealistic. She doesn't want to think about race so often, but she can't help it. She wants to be idealistic but she doesn't necessarily have that luxury.

*She feels close enough to the man to move cities and live with him. Her parents like him. Her friends approve. Why this nagging feeling that she may have made a mistake?*

The sentiment that she got lucky stays with her. She is lucky, at thirty-six, to have found someone like him. But is anyone telling him that he is lucky to have found her? As unglamorous as it sounds, she does have a steady job, and is in a position to support the man. Neither character is extremely likable or unlikable, and to say that she got lucky tilts the playing field to his advantage.

One could say that it is not a playing field—it is love, a relationship. But aren't all relationships also about power and who has it? To say that she got lucky takes away part of her agency, despite her being a capable person. Nevertheless, it is this kind of thinking, this kind of analysis, that probably led her to be single in the first place.

*These two characters are referred to in the story only as “the woman” and “the man.” Why did you choose not to name them?*

I am terrible at naming characters. But, in this case, I thought about the setting. The chef is unlikely to know the names of the customers. He might ask but then quickly forget. I also thought it would make for a nice contrast that the three of them have a friendly but somewhat abnormal conversation without knowing one another's names.

*Spoiler alert: the story ends with the man patting the woman on the head and telling her not to overthink things. Good advice for an uptight person, or patronizing mansplaining? How do you think we should ultimately read this relationship? Does it have a future?*

I wanted to leave it ambiguous. I hope I have succeeded! It could be taken both ways. The woman does overthink and the man is trying to comfort her. But the woman is also struggling with the unanswerable question of what is considered overthinking on the topic of race and culture. Had the man been Asian, the comment might not have seemed so patronizing. But since the man is white, the woman is questioning how much he really understands. She is up against thousands of years of history and the experiences of her parents. She overthinks because she is not just thinking for herself. So, I guess, this goes back to my original point that being able to think solely for yourself is a luxury.

Does the relationship have a future? Yes. But I don't know if the man and the woman will ever change. I don't know if the woman will come out and say everything she is

thinking because, as I write in the story, she doesn't want to sound insane. She also wants the man to be happy. A persistent stereotype is that Asians tend to be people-pleasers. So then is the woman staying with the man to keep the peace, or is the man actually a decent person? I have to believe that pleasing others is a common human trait. We all want to please someone. Even if the woman explains everything she is thinking to the man, would he understand? Or would he dismiss part of it? While the couple has moments of irritation with each other, there are no glaring red flags. The man at times proves to be sympathetic. He may not recognize all the intricacies of race, but that does not make him a racist. Yet what is considered glaring differs from person to person. The woman may think, I can tolerate this, I can tolerate him patting me on the head and telling me that I overthink, because some of his other qualities outweigh it.

*Your background, before you started writing, was in chemistry and public health. Do you think that your work in those fields brings something to your fiction writing?*

Maybe? Though having that background can hinder. I would have trouble writing fantasy or genre fiction, as I don't know how to make up something that technology or science doesn't do. In chemistry and public health, one's goal in writing is to be as clear as possible, to be structured (introduction, methods, discussion), and to sound like everyone else in the field. For my fiction writing, I do think about structure and clarity a lot. Yet, interestingly, I don't outline. I just write straight through.

*Your debut novel, "Chemistry," which won the PEN/Hemingway Award, came out last year. Are you thinking of writing a collection of stories now? Is "Omakase" part of a series?*

A collection of stories would be nice, but, truthfully, I need more time. I can see putting together a collection a bit later—I like reading collections that cover a longer period in a writer's career, as the stories then tend to be more different from one another. Currently, I am writing a second novel. When I get frustrated with it, which is frequently, I work on stories, or I don't work on anything and just read.

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