

I **HARDCOVER:** US I

Coming of age in a modern day Walden

Peter Rock's new novel of a father and daughter living off the land is based on a true story

BY JAMES PRESSLEY
BLOOMBERG

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Friends, jewelry, trips to the cinema. Caroline, though 13, has none of these.

She does have Father and a hidden garden. She owns a set of encyclopedias (up to L), a blue ribbon and Randy, a toy horse inside which she keeps "a scrap of paper rolled up tight where I have written a secret secret in case I ever forget it."

Caroline and Father have lots of secrets in Peter Rock's hypnotic and disturbing novel, *My Abandonment*. The most obvious one is their concealed home.

The place is Portland, Oregon. The year is 1999, a time of plenty for many, though not them. The two live in a dug-out cave roofed with branches, wire, metal and tarps camouflaged under a layer of earth deep inside Forest Park, a nature preserve with some 2,000 wooded hectares. They have a lookout post high in a tree and a stream for water and washing. Once a week, they go into town for supplies.

This narrative, however odd, is grounded in reality. In 2004, police found a Vietnam War veteran and his 12-year-old daughter living in a shelter in Forest Park. The man had no job and only a US\$400-a-month disability check for money, the Associated Press reported.

They had been there for four years, with the father educating his daughter with old encyclopedias. A pediatrician examined the girl and found no evidence of physical or sexual abuse. A police sergeant got the man a job on a horse farm.

Rock, who teaches writing at Portland's Reed College, takes this case as a starting point for his new novel, told in the voice of a girl whose life will be oddly blessed and blighted by a latter-day Henry David Thoreau.

'THE LUCKY ONES'

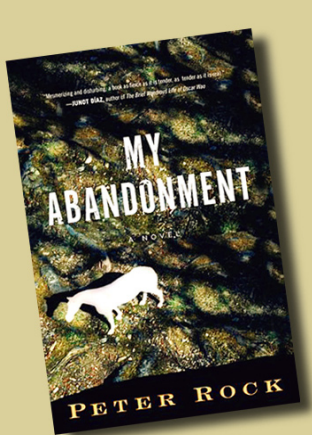
"We're the lucky ones," Father tells her one night.

"We are," she replies, obedient yet beginning to ask questions about Father's judgment, her missing mother and what really happened those years ago when she wrote a name on a piece of paper and slipped it into Randy.

As the story opens, Caroline is growing in confidence and has learned to live off the land (a skill worth acquiring if our economic crisis gets much worse).

"I am the one who knows about food in the forest park, the best places for blackberries," she says

Publication Notes



MY ABANDONMENT
BY PETER ROCK
240 PAGES
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT

in her slightly stilted (and convincing) idiom, "and when the morels are up I know where to find them and the mushroom harvests are maybe when we eat best. There are ferns you can also eat."

Their idyll will soon end.

Before the story closes, Caroline and Father will be resettled to a farm, squat in a hotel facing demolition and get lost in a rural snowstorm.

TANTALIZING GAPS

The narrative unfolds as a meditative interior monologue, with some of the plot developing beyond Caroline's immature comprehension, leaving tantalizing gaps for the reader to fill. Gaps that may be filled with crime and sex.

Yet bit by bit a — a steady as water dripping on limestone — reality carves a groove in Caroline's consciousness, turning her childhood trust into a sense of betrayal.

"This is not the way we used to be," she pleads with Father. "This is not a way we were ever supposed to be."

Yet she will never escape Father, who has shaped her understanding with ideas like this one, drawn from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The way of life is wonderful. It is by abandonment."

If this is a bildungsroman, it's one for grownups. Caroline comes of age in circumstances so harsh yet so tender that her redemption will be tempered by loss and uncommon learning.

Chang Tao-fan (張道藩) gave up his high-paying but stressful job at *Next* magazine last year to take a break in the mountains. One year later, he's emerged with his third book about the police. The stories are not adrenalin-pumping tales of car chases and gunfights, they are tales about how village policemen and women, mostly Aborigines, protect forests from poachers, rescue lost climbers and preserve tribal culture.

"I have no intention to write about how [they] go about doing their jobs as police. That constitutes only part of the stories. There is a lot more: their lives, families, friends and communities. It's about people and how they live and perceive life," said Chang, author of the *Police Story* (警察故事) series of books.

Chang began his journalism career 26 years ago as a reporter who regularly covered the police and crime. The job enabled him to become friends with both beat cops and high-ranking officers. His interest in biographies and observing people has made him an adept profile writer.

After nine years of working as a head of the crime desk (社會新聞中心主任) at the *Liberty Times* (the *Taipei Times*' sister paper), the veteran newsman resigned in 2000 to return to what he loved most: reading and writing. It didn't take long before *Unitas Literary Monthly* (聯合文學) approached him about publishing a book on the police.

"I like buying and reading books. It never occurred to me that I would one day write one, because who would want to read it?" he said.

The publisher persisted with the project that eventually evolved into

Chang's first *Police Story* about nine former directors or deputy directors of the National Police Agency (警政署), as well as four other retired high-ranking officers and how they rose to the top.

"Some said there was a lack of critical writing in the work. But as far as I am concerned, I was telling stories, not writing history," Chang said. Instead, he wanted to understand the traits that allowed these men to become so successful.

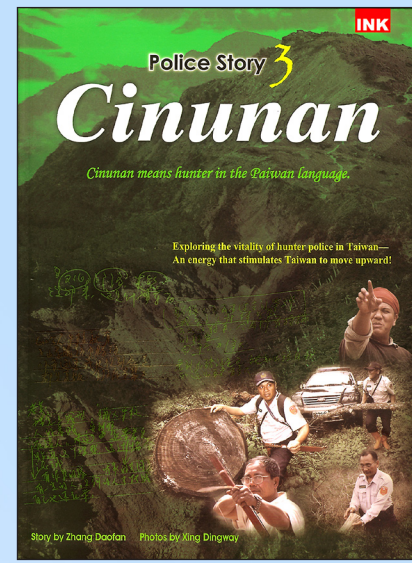
Chang's long journalism career reads like a miniature history of Taiwan's media. It began at the long-defunct *Universal News* (環球日報), *United Evening News*, *Liberty Times*, *Era News* (年代電視台), followed by *Apple Daily* and *Next*. During his time at *Era*, he finished the second volume of *Police Story*, which is about families whose fathers, sons and husbands were killed in the line of duty.

One of many things Chang learned from police veterans is that one should never be content with fame or past achievements, and one should never leave until the job is done.

And Chang did leave, this time to the mountains in Taitung and Pingtung. His hiatus, however, didn't last long because he began to work on a project that had been brewing in his mind for some time — a book about unsung heroes in small towns and villages.

Chang didn't set out to focus on Aboriginal cops. But as he traveled extensively to distant villages to research and find sources for his book, he discovered there was something extraordinary about them.

"I found out that if they didn't enter the police force, they would have been excellent tribal hunters just like their



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I like buying and reading books. It never occurred to me that I would one day write one, because who would want to read it?

— Chang Tao-fan, writer

fathers and brothers. What makes them so special is the hunter's spirit that is passed down through generations in their culture," Chang said.

Cinunan, meaning hunter in the Paiwan (排灣) language, are those who understand the language of the Earth and nature, respect all creatures and never act in their own self-interest.

This spirit runs in the blood of all the protagonists in Chang's book, including

the charismatic Paiwan writer, Aboriginal leader and forest patrolman Ahronglong Sakinu; and Giyu Rutalengan, known locally as "God of the Mountain."

Chang said Rutalengan made the strongest impression on him. "He is so ordinary but does very meaningful things ... He's taught me that as long as you have faith, you can accomplish anything," he said.

Throughout the book, Chang tries to convey the earnestness and sincerity with which these policemen treat everyone, even to strangers, which he believes enables them to have empathy for others and put the community's well-being before their own.

"I often think of them. Sometimes when I appear lost in thought, my wife will say: 'You are thinking of your friends in the east again, right?'" Chang said, laughing.

Chang has clearly changed as a result of his experiences with the "hunter" policemen. At the invitation of the National Police Agency, he has recently taken up a new career as a consultant and now travels across the country to train police officers in areas including how to deal with the press.

The media veteran has found new meaning in life through his educational work, even though he makes less money than he used to as a senior journalist. "There are things in life that can't be measured by money. People form values and new meanings in life, and during that process, they change and evolve. To me, that's the most essential thing," he said.

Below: The protagonists in Chang Tao-fan's latest book *Police Story 3: Cinunan*. PHOTO COURTESY OF HSING TING-WEI

Unsung heroes

Veteran journalist Chang Tao-fan searches for the hunter's spirit in his new book about Aboriginal police officers

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

I **HARDCOVER:** US I

Remembrance of things past and political

Guo Songfen's stories have much in common with chamber music, with themes appearing, disappearing, and then re-emerging when you least expect it

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Guo Songfen (郭松棻) was Taiwan's shy modernist. Born in 1938, he published only a handful of short stories before his death in 2006 in the US, where he'd been living for 40 years. Because he'd been to China to get support from Zhou Enlai (周恩來) for Taiwan's protests at the US' 1971 decision to return the Senkaku, or Diaoyutai (釣魚台) islands to Japanese jurisdiction, he was denied re-entry to Taiwan. He took a job as translator at the UN in 1972 and stayed there for the rest of his life.

He'd been brought up in Taipei and studied and taught at the National Taiwan University. Some of his colleagues eventually became celebrated Taiwanese modernists, but Guo was always diffident, and a fastidious perfectionist. This volume of six stories marks a welcome reappearance, in persuasive English translations, of this elusive figure.

What was literary modernism? It's helpful to think of the equivalent movement in painting

where 20th century modernists did everything except paint things as they actually appeared. Similarly, the literary modernists wrote in all the ways they could imagine other than telling a gripping story with a beginning, a middle and an end (the way stories had been told for thousands of years).

To do this, they had to invent devices to replace the attraction of the traditional narratives. James Joyce, for instance, linked different colors, scents and parts of the human body to each section of *Ulysses*. Guo employs many non-traditional stylistic devices as well. One story in this book, *Moon Seal*, consists entirely of isolated sentences, each printed as a separate paragraph. In another, *Clover*, the two characters are presented as "you" and "he," as in the following: "You saw a face full of life's perplexities. He was not yet thirty years old."

The title story, *Running Mother* (奔跑的母親), is characteristic of Guo's writing. A man is talking to a psychiatrist, a friend since school days, about

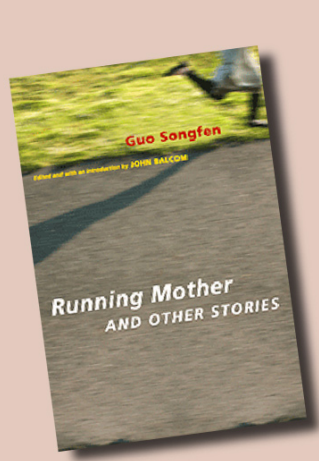
a recurring dream of his mother running away from him. He also has an obsession with the line where the night seascape meets the sky. There are many Proust-like evocations as well — musty odors of mildew and camphor, memories of the narrator's mother soaking her long hair in cold tea, the scent of osmanthus flowers and the sight of egrets.

The story circles around itself, themes rising to the surface and then sinking from view, but the perpetually running mother never entirely leaves the scene. The story is thus very like a dream in which nothing gets resolved, but certain preoccupations nonetheless refuse to go away.

It's full of memories of Taiwan's era of Martial Law and White Terror. The psychiatrist's father had "unexpectedly been shot dead in the [Chiayi] Train Station," and the narrator's father similarly goes out one day and never comes back.

But these political references aren't taken up by Guo to form part of some wider social protest.

Publication Notes



RUNNING MOTHER AND OTHER STORIES
BY GUO SONGFEN
259 PAGES
COLUMBIA

Instead, they're scattered through these stories as startling, shocking interpolations, stumbled on and then passed over, though the author can naturally rely on his reader's knowledge that such events were in fact too real.

Guo has been called unusual among modernists in including such routine political allusions in his stories. He may be untypical in this in the Taiwanese context, but many Western modernists were highly political in their concerns. Joyce himself put a lot of recent Irish history into his early books, and Ezra Pound included ill-organized material about Italian economics in the Renaissance period in his *Cantos*.

The one exception to Guo's lack of an explicit political focus is the last story in this book, *Brightly Shine the Stars Tonight*. This features an army general at the time of the 228 Incident, widely seen as being Taiwan Executive Administrator Chen Yi (陳儀), though Guo denied this in an interview. What's distinctive is that the general is portrayed

sympathetically, longing to return to private life and thinking the army's rule did people little real good. Once again, Guo's concern to try untested waters is displayed.

Like many slow, fastidious writers, Guo embeds aphorisms and carefully polished sentences in his work. He's also fond of recording aesthetic impressions, registering changes in the light, commenting on "the chill feebleness of life," and having characters cry "for no reason other than for life itself."

There are some brilliant moments, as when one character who complains of insomnia decides she may have had a perfect night, and only dreamed that she couldn't sleep.

The difference between Taiwan's modernists and their European and American counterparts is that the Taiwanese came later. They were in actuality imitating their Western predecessors, but it was also part of a very widespread desire to reject traditional Chinese culture

in favor of foreign models. The tendency flourished in many areas of society — clothing, food and music, etc — and is still present today, and obvious in every aspect of Taiwanese life. It's what makes Taipei, for instance, in so many ways an "international" city.

Guo is in essence a stylist — it's no accident his favorite book was *Madame Bovary*, as his wife reveals in a Foreword. An introspective, contemplative writer, his stories have much in common with chamber music, with themes appearing, disappearing, and then re-emerging when you least expect it. Sometimes there's a grand moment when they all appear together before the final silence.

Running Mother and Other Stories (edited by John Balcom and translated by a variety of translators) is a very valuable publication, and an important addition of Columbia's indispensable Modern Chinese Literature from Taiwan series. This now contains over 20 titles and is still going strong.