

Interview with Pik-Shuen Fung

[00:00:10] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. Today, I'm talking to Pik-Shuen Fung about her debut novel, GHOST FOREST, which is out now from One World Books. You can find a complete transcript of our conversation over on our website, readingwomenpodcast.com. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:33] **Kendra** So I am so thrilled to be able to talk to Pik-Shuen Fung today. I was so excited about her book because K-Ming Chang told me about it back last fall. And so I've had it written down on my list of possible interviews for a long time now. So I was so excited when she agreed to come on the podcast. And we were able to have this wonderful conversation. One of the things that really struck me about Fung's book was that she was able to capture this vignette style in her performance on the audiobook. As many of you know, I listen to audiobooks to be able to read. And so I loved the narration on this book. And I was like, wait, I thought the author read this book. This sounds very much like a professional narrator. And it was, in fact, the author herself. She did a fabulous job. And we talk about that a lot in the interview because I was so just delighted by the way that she was able to add so much to the book with her performance without being overbearing. And finding that balance is really difficult, particularly if you've never narrated an audiobook before. So it's such a fabulous book. So we talk a lot about the book and how she wrote it and that process in the interview. So I don't want to keep spoiling that.

[00:01:57] **Kendra** But before we jump into my conversation with Pik-Shuen Fung, I want to tell you a little bit about her. She is a Canadian writer and artist living in New York City. She is the recipient of fellowships and residencies from the Asian American Writers' Workshop, Kundiman, the Millay Colony, and Storyknife. Her debut novel, GHOST FOREST, is out now from One World in the US and Strange Light in Canada. So without further ado, here is my conversation with debut author, Pik-Shuen Fung. Welcome to the podcast, Pik-Shuen. I'm so excited to have you on.

[00:02:40] **Pik-Shuen** Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm excited to be here.

[00:02:44] **Kendra** Well, I remember when K-Ming Chang told me about your book last year. And from her description, I knew I had to talk to you about GHOST FOREST. But first, how are you doing? How are you doing getting ready for your book's debut? I believe it's next week as of this recording.

[00:03:05] **Pik-Shuen** First of all, I am so touched to hear that because I am K-Ming's biggest fan. So, it's so nice to hear that. She also enjoyed my book. I think I'm having lots of different feelings now since it's one week out. It feels surreal. It feels like this is what I waited for for six years. And now it's finally happening. But because it's my first book, I'm also constantly wondering, like, am I doing this correctly? What is supposed to happen next? There's just so much uncertainty and so much excitement at the same time.

[00:03:49] **Kendra** Yeah, I can only imagine what it's like to put your heart and soul into a book for so long and then just present it to the world for like judgment essentially. But based on everyone talking about your book before it has launched, it sounds like you're getting some great feedback, some great reviews on it. And this is your debut. I have to ask, like, how this book kind of came into being? You mentioned you've been working on it for six years. So what was that process like for you?

[00:04:21] **Pik-Shuen** My background is actually in visual art, so I painted for many years. I studied painting in undergrad, and I also went to grad school for visual art. But when I got to grad school, I started to question for the first time in my life why I was only painting. And I wasn't sure if that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I was asking myself, what kind of art do I want to make? Why was I making art? What's my voice? What kind of artist do I want to become in the long term? So I started experimenting with a lot of different mediums. And I tried soft sculpture. I took this elective in the soft-sculpture department. And I realized I didn't really enjoy working with my hands. Like, we were doing weaving. And we were doing, like, sewing objects. And I realized that wasn't for me. And then I started making some videos that I learned from watching YouTube videos. And then in the summer between my first and second year, my dad passed away. And I was in this space of grief, which was kind of hazy. And I was also reading Alice Munro's short stories. And one day I felt inspired to write something down. So I wrote out one of the vignettes that ended up being in the book. And because I was in art school, I needed to figure out a way to show it visually. So I recorded myself reading the vignette aloud. And then I used that as voiceover for a video piece. But over time, I realized that I really just wanted to focus on the writing because that's what I enjoyed most. So I wrote more and more vignettes, and eventually it accumulated into this book.

[00:06:37] **Kendra** I love hearing when artists move from one discipline to another because I feel like they bring a lot of that understanding to their work. You mentioned it took six years to write it. Was that a process of trying to refine the vignettes to the ones that you wanted to use to create the whole narrative? What were some of the challenges that you worked on as you were figuring out what this novel was going to look like?

[00:07:04] **Pik-Shuen** There were so many challenges. I really had no idea what I was getting myself into. I think that in the beginning, it was really driven by my creative impulses and intuition. And I completed an earlier, shorter version of the manuscript back in 2016 or so. And I ended up sending this manuscript to tons of small presses, and it got rejected by all of them. I ended up looking at what other books written in vignettes were published out there. And I saw that a lot of them had this faster paced, shorter vignettes linked by asterisks type of format. So there was a period when I rewrote my whole book in this format. I spent some time trying to write it as a more traditional, structured novel. But I was really bad at that. Also, I started another project, which I began interviewing my mother and grandmother about some of their stories. Then finally, I got accepted by the Asian American Writers' Workshop for the Margins Fellowship. And at this point, I'd kind of reached this mentality of like, oh, maybe my book won't ever get published. But the fellowship was so supportive and so encouraging. I decided to give the book one more shot. So I combined the earlier manuscript I had and these oral histories that I had recorded with my mother and grandmother. But I fictionalized them a lot. And I merged them into one book. And I also met my editor, Nicole Counts, in a class that I took at the workshop. And she really liked my writing. And she eventually bought the book.

[00:09:30] **Kendra** So after the book was bought by One World, how long did it take for your manuscript to go from this stage to the more finished product that is about to be released into the world now?

[00:09:45] **Pik-Shuen** I would say the editing process took about eight months—seven or eight months. It was actually in the editing process that I decided to revert the structure back to what it was when I had started, which is each vignette sits on its own page, surrounded by a lot of empty space. And I realized during the edits that I wanted to have

this slow and spacious quality. So this was my chance to publish it in the way that I wanted, which is having each vignette have its own page.

[00:10:31] **Kendra** Well, I really love fragmented stories like this. And it creates a mosaic together. And till you see the complete picture, which is something I always love experiencing when reading a book like this. You talked about Alice Munro and her short stories. I adore Alice Munro. She does such an amazing job at telling incredible stories in such a short space. Well, I guess for you, for each vignette . . . was that a long process of polishing them up to their most pristine stage? And were there a lot of vignettes that ended up on the cutting-room floor, as it were?

[00:11:15] **Pik-Shuen** Yeah, it's been quite a varied process. Some of the vignettes, I wrote from the first sentence to the last in one sitting years ago and have barely changed even in the book that's getting published soon. But some of them, I definitely spent a lot of time refining and thinking about whether a certain word should go before or after another word. And what's the best word? Most of that happened in the editing process, which I actually found really satisfying to be able to think about each word intentionally. And there were definitely lots of vignettes that did not end up making it into the book.

[00:12:08] **Kendra** You mentioned how you were doing this oral history project with your mother and grandmother and how that informed the final version of the book. And I love hearing that because that's something that I wrote down about the book that I wanted to chat with you about, the way that the women in the novel tell stories to each other and how they interpret their own pasts and their presents. And that's a continuous discussion throughout the entire book, even until the end of the novel. What about this kind of storytelling captivated you? And I guess what really struck you that it would be a good way to incorporate . . . it would be a good thing to incorporate into your novel?

[00:12:54] **Pik-Shuen** I was really interested in this collective form of storytelling because I feel like in my experience of Chinese families, there is so much focus on the family and not very much focus on the individual members of the family. So instead of having the narrator convey all of her mother's and grandmother's stories to the reader, I wanted to give the mother and grandmother characters a chance to speak for themselves—also because I feel like with a lot of women, especially Chinese women in older generations, they're often erased from the narratives or silenced. And I just wanted the chance to give these characters to tell their own stories and share the things that they wanted to share and have them be humorous and intelligent and boast about things that happened in their past and joyful. Yeah, I just wanted to capture these other qualities that they have.

[00:14:12] **Kendra** I remember talking with K-Ming Chang about this very thing about her debut novel, *BESTIARY*, and how that was something that she was thinking about as well. And she talked about Maxine Hong Kingston and different inspirations for her. Is that something that you took from your own life, as well as from the literature that you had read before writing the book?

[00:14:39] **Pik-Shuen** Yeah, I took a lot from my own experience growing up, hearing stories in my family, the way that women in my family would share stories in the past in kind of an indirect way and also communicate through these, like, opaque proverbs that I would not understand growing up. And I've also done, as a smaller side project years ago, I interviewed six Asian Canadians and Asian Americans about whether they'd ever said "I love you" to their parents. And I ended up editing those sound recordings that I made into a short audio piece and oral history. And I really enjoyed that experience of listening and

also being able to kind of put together a type of arc through all these different voices. So that experience was really a big influence on the way that I wrote this book too.

[00:15:54] **Kendra** There's this incredibly beautiful moment in the book where the narrator is discussing saying "I love you" to her parents and like her family, whether or not they say "I love you" to each other. And that really kind of encapsulated this whirlwind of feeling she was having as she had a very sick family member in the hospital. And this book really becomes a portrait of grief and what that looks like. For me, this was one of my most favorite parts of the book because it was such a beautiful experience. And with the different vignettes, it's almost like you're putting together this picture. And I could visualize it in my mind. And I'm not sure if this is just the kind of reader I am that I like to imagine structure in my head as I'm reading a book. But all of this really worked together in this single moment when she's having this discussion, you know, internally, but also talking to her family about it. And it was just . . . I don't really have any words for it. It was a very beautiful moment in the book.

[00:16:56] **Pik-Shuen** Well, thank you so much. Yeah, I think for that scene, I really wanted to capture this experience of growing up in a family that lives in two countries at the same time because a lot of times when, you know, families immigrate together, each member experiences adapting to the new culture and the new customs. But for these astronaut families, one member—usually the father—stays behind. In this case of the novel, the father stays in Hong Kong. And so he never really spends enough time in Canada to have to adapt to this Canadian way of expressing affection. Or even . . . he never even has to see what it's like for the rest of his family, just as the rest of this family doesn't see what it's like for him to live alone in Hong Kong and provide for them. So in this scene that you're describing in which the narrator decides to say "I love you" to her father for the first time, I just wanted to capture this inner conflict and also kind of the the humor of the situation where a twenty-six-year-old woman is trying so hard to say "I love you" for the first time to her father and just hoping to hear it said back to her.

[00:18:58] **Kendra** You capture this in-between space that the narrator inhabits—having one parent in one country and her mother in Canada—and how she's also moving back and forth between spaces a lot, which is really interesting to read that process. And it's almost like she cannot settle in herself and an understanding of herself. And that's illustrated in that physical movement. And so when she goes back when her dad is in the hospital, and there's like this whole process of his condition that's really illustrated through her like physicality as well, which is something that it just struck me reading over and over in these little vignettes, like her feelings. And sometimes you'll tackle the same topic or theme in a vignette, but you'll look at it from a different perspective. And I found that very engaging and just, yeah, I really love vignette kind of novels because this is one of their strengths in that they can look at things from multiple perspectives in this way, like a prism or something like that.

[00:20:09] **Pik-Shuen** Thank you so much. I think that besides, yeah, the structure of the vignette allowing for me to look at the novel from different angles . . . also, the fact that I started writing it in 2014 . . . this very long process allowed me to look at each part of the novel from different angles. And I spent so much time printing out the manuscript on tiny pieces of paper and rearranging it on my floor so many times just to see what it could look like and what the difference would be if the order was slightly one way or another. So, yeah, I'm really happy to hear that you had that experience.

[00:21:09] **Kendra** I'm huge structural nerd with books. And I love hearing that you printed out your book on pieces of paper and move them around because that's—whenever I'm working on a big writing project—that's what I do. It's I take giant chunks of it, and I'll physically move them around, whether that's like a point on a, you know, index card or printing them completely out like that. And I really love the way that your book has that structure with the short text. And the novel itself is pretty short as well. I don't know what it is in print, but it's about four to five hours on audio. I listened to it. And I was about to say two sit-downs, but you don't really sit down when you're listening to an audiobook. I listened to it in, like, over the course of two days. And I really loved getting that bird's eye view of the structure. And the second time I go through it, I want to look at the page and see that white space because it sounds like that plays such a big role in how you envisioned your novel turning out.

[00:22:19] **Pik-Shuen** Yeah, originally when I started writing these vignettes because I was in art school and recording the vignette as voiceover, I wasn't showing the pages to anyone. But probably because of my background as a painter, I just wanted it to look nice on the page for myself. And I really liked having each one on its own page with lots of space around it. So that's how I ended up structuring the layout of the novel. And even though it was a sort of artistic impulse in the beginning, I think that on hindsight, it works really well because I also wanted to write a book that feels slow and spacious, even though it's a book about grief. I think that sometimes we have this idea that artworks about grief are heavy or dense and somber. And I also wanted to write a book about grief that feels light and airy and and joyful at times too.

[00:23:40] **Kendra** And that's something that, listening to the audiobook, that I definitely gathered from you reading it. And I love that you performed the audiobook. And you are excellent. I want to put it in a petition for you to narrate more audiobooks because I enjoyed it so much. For you, since you were very much visual when working on your book, what was it like reading the audiobook out loud? And did that change how you saw your novel?

[00:24:09] **Pik-Shuen** It was an amazing experience, very intense, but incredibly amazing. I knew that I wanted to narrate the audiobook from the beginning, but I wasn't sure if I would get the opportunity. So I remember sending one of my video works from grad school to the producer. And I was so excited when he wrote back and said, "Yes, looking forward to hearing your rendition of it." And I didn't know what to expect. I knew that it was going to be quite demanding because the recording day is from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. And mine, because it's a shorter audiobook, it took about two days. So I went to the studio. And because it's the pandemic, the director and the audio engineer Skyped in and gave me direction from my headphones. And it was just this incredible experience to work with them because I was able to share what I envisioned for the audiobook as something that gives a lot of space to the listener. And then the director gave me the perfect kind of direction. She, you know, she would say something like, "Okay, I just want you to distinguish this line and the next line." But she wouldn't specify exactly how, so there was so much room for me to interpret as well. So in the end, even though it was so physically demanding to sit there from 10:00 to 5:00 for two days reading my book aloud, it felt like I brought this work alive in a totally different way. Yeah, I'm just going to cherish that memory forever.

[00:26:26] **Kendra** Yeah, and you also have a finished product so you can go back and listen to it. I know a lot of people have feelings about listening to themselves, but you sound . . . you sound fabulous. You sound like you've done this before. And I actually had

to double check to see. I was like, wait, did they hire someone? Like, I thought this was read by the author. And I was just so delighted by it. So, yeah.

[00:26:50] **Pik-Shuen** Oh my gosh. I am so delighted to hear this because I don't think I'll be able to handle listening to myself for four and a half hours. But I will take your word for it. And I'm so pleased to hear that it turned out well.

[00:27:07] **Kendra** Yeah. Yeah, I really loved the added emotion that you brought to it because, well, for me, as someone who primarily listens to literature rather than reading it on a page, there's so much added meaning via the narrator. And that can introduce ideas that you like or you don't like. There's just so much added nuance to that. And when an author reads their work, you're getting an added layer of information from the author, whether you realize it or not. And that's something that I think worked really well with GHOST FOREST because there's so much emotion and depth to the book.

[00:27:48] **Pik-Shuen** I'm so glad you shared that because I was thinking a lot about the emotional tone of the narration. And I wanted there to be lots of space for the listener to bring their own emotions and interpretations. So I didn't want to read it in a way that felt very emotional or really guiding the listener towards specific emotions. But I didn't want it to be completely flat the whole time either. So it was definitely something that I tried to work on with the director, which parts you get glimpses of emotion and which parts are read in a way that feels more held back and allows the reader to draw their own connections.

[00:28:53] **Kendra** I think you definitely succeeded in that. And also one of the incredibly important things about an audiobook like this is that there is a lot of Chinese language in the book. And it's really important that you have a narrator who can say that correctly, and especially when you talk about dialects and accents and you get into all of that, I think that was also a great benefit because the book already sounds very poetic in its prose. And I felt like you had that natural flow that's incredibly important to narration when switching between languages, which can often trip a narrator up if they're not careful. And it just added to the whole experience. So I can't wait till you write another book so that you can read it, and then I'll just listen to it again, and it'll be great.

[00:29:49] **Pik-Shuen** Oh my gosh. Thank you. I actually had sent a bunch of WhatsApp messages to my mom before I went into the studio just to confirm how certain Cantonese proverbs are pronounced. And even though my mother tongue is Cantonese, there's still a lot of times when I accidentally pronounce a character in the wrong tone or I mix up words that sound a little similar all the time. So I made my mom send me all these voice recordings over WhatsApp of all the Chinese characters in the book.

[00:30:35] **Kendra** Well, I'm glad that it all worked out. And I mean, I feel like that would be really cool for your mom, though, also to be kind of part of this project, which really works for the novel, which is about this collaborative storytelling between women in particular.

[00:30:50] **Pik-Shuen** Mm, yeah.

[00:30:50] **Kendra** Well, I feel like I could talk about your book with you for ages. But I know you have a lot of things to prep for as your book is coming out next week. But I want to ask you a couple closer questions to kind of round out the interview, if that sounds good to you.

[00:31:11] **Pik-Shuen** Yeah, that sounds great.

[00:31:13] **Kendra** So the first one is now that I know that you are a visual artist—which I didn't know coming in; I think that is very exciting—what was the process like finding a cover for your book? As someone who has studied art and, I imagine, has, you know, a lot of visual art, you know, began this kind of process for you. What was that experience like?

[00:31:38] **Pik-Shuen** Wow, it was an amazing experience. Because of my background in visual art, I had specific qualities that I wanted. But I also didn't want to try to do it myself or anything because I'm not the designer. So I actually put together this nine-page, keynote presentation where I put adjectives and example reference images. And I shared that I would either want to see an abstract painting direction or this kind of surrealist collage direction. And I also shared some images of what I didn't want to see. And I totally contradicted myself because I put down six covers that I love, and all of them, I think, had a woman on the cover. And then on the next page I wrote, "I don't want any people on the cover." So I am so grateful to the designer, Donna Chang, because she somehow absorbed my nine-page document, and she came back with this cover that is on the final book almost exactly as it is now. We only changed one small element. But I just felt so grateful that she somehow intuitively interpreted that I wanted a woman on the cover; I just didn't want a face or a body. And I love that she chose this brilliant, chartreuse cover for the background because I really didn't want a cover that felt like really somber and sad. So I think that really captured the lightness that I wanted people to see when they see the book. Yeah, it was . . . it was . . . it felt like a magical, telepathic kind of process to see this cover.

[00:33:59] **Kendra** And it captures the emotional quality of the book. But also that fragmented structure is mirrored in the cover because it has so many different elements that come together on the cover. And I know very little about design, I must confess. But I love book structure and seeing that mirrored on a cover just makes me very happy because it's sort of like a nod, like, you know, a nod to the kind of book that it is, which is pretty great.

[00:34:32] **Pik-Shuen** Yeah, I just love that it has this dreamlike quality. And it has the fragmentation, like you said. And it also . . . or Donna also chose these images that I felt had a lot of emotional resonance throughout the book.

[00:34:55] **Kendra** So the last question I have for you is for book recommendations of books that you love, whether they are books that maybe inspired you to write your novel or maybe just the books that you've really enjoyed reading recently, whatever you want to share with our listeners.

[00:35:13] **Pik-Shuen** One of the books that inspired me when I first started writing my novel is *A FEATHER ON THE BREATH OF GOD* by Sigred Nunez, which is so beautiful. And the structure of that is also amazing. And it's written in four parts. The first part is the father. The second part is the mother. The third part is the narrator's experience studying ballet. And then the fourth part is her lover. I love that book so much. And as for books that I recently read, I loved *HOW TO PRONOUNCE KNIFE* by Souvankham Thammavongsa. And I've also really enjoyed *THE TENDERNESS OF STONES* by Marion Fayolle. I'm not sure if you've seen that. It's a graphic novel. And it also follows a family that's dealing with the illness of the father. And it has these kind of absurd, playful images, but it's also devastating at the same time.

[00:36:41] **Kendra** I haven't heard of it, but I'm definitely going to be adding it to my list. One of my favorite things about doing interviews is getting recommendations. And so I love hearing about those. And I've also heard great things of HOW TO PRONOUNCE KNIFE. A friend of mine, that is like one of his favorite books like ever. And I've actually bought it twice by accident because I bought it on two separate audiobook platforms.

[00:37:10] **Pik-Shuen** Oh, my gosh.

[00:37:11] **Kendra** So I will definitely have to bump it up my TBR now, especially since, you know, I apparently forgot I had it and bought it again. So here we are.

[00:37:23] **Pik-Shuen** It's amazing. And I'm also . . . I just started reading BURNT SUGAR by Avni Doshi as well. And that's . . . it's beautiful so far.

[00:37:34] **Kendra** That just came to the US this year, didn't it? Late last year? This year?

[00:37:38] **Pik-Shuen** Yes. Yes, I think it was published in the UK previously?

[00:37:46] **Kendra** Yeah, because I remember. . .

[00:37:47] **Pik-Shuen** It just came out here.

[00:37:48] **Kendra** It was on the Booker, what, longlist?

[00:37:50] **Pik-Shuen** I think it maybe it made it to the Booker shortlist. But she had . . . the narrator has this really sharp, incisive voice that I'm really enjoying.

[00:38:00] **Kendra** Well, thank you so much for joining me to talk about GHOST FOREST. I am so excited for your launch and for your book to make it out into the world.

[00:38:11] **Pik-Shuen** Well, thank you so much, Kendra, for having me. It's been such a wonderful experience talking to you. And I appreciate your insightful read of the book. And, yeah, I'm. . . . Thank you so much.

[00:38:30] **Kendra** And that's our show. I'd like to thank Pik-Shuen Fung for talking with me about her debut novel, GHOST FOREST, which is out now from One World Books. You can find her on her website, pikshuen.com and on Twitter (@pikshuen). Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. This episode was produced and edited by me, Kendra Winchester. Our music is by Miki Saito with Isaac Greene. And you can find us on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thank you so much for listening.