

Transcript for Dust Jackets Author Interview with Melissa Yuan-Innes

Maggie Lynch

Hello, and welcome to dust jackets conversations with authors. My special guest today is Melissa Yuan-Innes who also writes as Melissa Yi. Hi, Melissa.

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Hey, Maggie, good to see you.

Maggie Lynch

So, usually I start off these by reading someone's bio. But for you, because you're both a physician and an author, I wasn't able to kind of decide what bio to read. And so, instead, I'm going to ask you to tell our listeners a little bit about yourself. You know, the both sides and how they've kind of managed to meld together to create some great books, particularly your latest books, the Hope Sze series.

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Sure, for sure. Thank you. Um, so my name is Melissa Yuan-Innes, and I write a lot of fiction as Melissa Yi, which is just the first two letters of my last names. I'm probably best known for my Hope Sze medical mysteries. And I am an emergency physician. So, people are often curious about how I do it and how I balance, and if I use any real stories in it, that sort of thing.

I also write nonfiction. My most popular collection of essays is called *The Most Unfeeling Doctor in the World, and other True Tales from the Emergency Room*, which recently was in the Ottawa Fringe Festival and won Best of Fest for my one woman show. So, that was a lot of fun, taking, basically a memoir and bringing it to the stage. I have also written romance and young adult and children's books. But I don't have a lot of time right now, so I am concentrating on Hope Sze, and on writing nonfiction.

Maggie Lynch

Well, thank you, and congratulations on the Fringe Festival. That's really wonderful.

Maggie Lynch

When I first started reading your books, I actually did start with the Hope Sze books because I like this kind of suspense thriller stuff and you don't do the, you know, blood and gore for gore's sake in your writing. You have really good characters. Of course, they're in medical school or related to medicine in some way. So, the first question, of course, is what part of those books reflect your own experiences in medical school? And, you know, some of the mysteries that you create—maybe not the mysteries themselves, but the incidents and the types of ways that people are murdered. Have you ever experienced those things yourself?

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Um, so I will just start off by saying that I was in residency when I started writing the first book. So, you do medical school, which is usually four years. So you do your undergraduate degree, which is three to four years. Or two to four years of schooling, going to university, like everybody else, getting a Bachelor's degree. And then you do medical school, which is usually four years to get your MD. And then you have Residency, which is two to five years of postgraduate training. And then you can also do Fellowships on top of that. So like I was really a long, long time in school.

So, in my case I was matched. That's the other thing is that after medical school, you don't know where you're going to go. You know what specialty you want to apply for. And you apply for different cities and programs across the country or it could be around the world. In my case, I was not sure, so did Family Medicine in Montreal.

When I got there, I was like, I couldn't believe it. Like I was just like, why are people reversing down one-way streets? Like they're, they're reversing in my face, like I know what's going on. And, you know, how can they turn left on a red light, like just with no warning that they can be in the right hand lane. So just the driving alone was just freaky. And then potholes and you know, the buildings are literally falling apart. That was even before I got to the hospital.

But when all that happened, I was you know, residency is very go, go go. But towards the end of it, I think it was just sort of percolating back of my mind, like, what is going on here. And I decided to write a series about a resident who solves crimes. So not only to save lives, but also to figure out the murderers. And I have sometimes taken inspiration from stuff that happened at the hospital. But usually just I mix it up.

So, for the latest one, *Scorpion Scheme*, Hope Sze is in Egypt. And that's because a travel company asked me to write novels set in countries around the world. They would give me free trips in exchange for writing books for them. And part of the deal was that I could write books myself separately. So that's Hope in Egypt. While I was there a bomb went off near the pyramids, like near the Egyptian Museum with my tour group. So that was kind of the inspiration for *Scorpion Scheme*.

The previous book, *Graveyard Shift*, was partly inspired by a case by one of the police officers. Not everybody realizes this, but police come to the emergency room quite often. They'll have somebody who's in custody, who, for example, has chest pains, and they bring them in to get checked over before they bring them away. So, in that case, he [the policeman] was there, but he wasn't there for that reason. And he told me about a case that he had recently. And I was like, Oh, boy, I'm in the middle of writing a book set on an airplane. But after that, I'm gonna write your book. And I did. So that was *Graveyard Shift*. And it all takes place in one night. The entire book is just one night shift, with things happening one after the other. Wow.

Maggie Lynch

So, you certainly do get a lot of inspiration there. Are you still working full time as a physician? Now?

Melissa Yuan-Innes

I don't work full-time. I consider myself semi-retired. My other passion is financial independence, and retire early. So, I recommend everybody, you know, just work hard, live on less, and try to save up money so that you can spend your time doing what you'd like to do. And in my case, I really enjoy writing.

Maggie Lynch

Well, that's great. I wasn't sure if you were retired, and then went back because of COVID. Or you were purposefully semi-retired.

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Purposefully. But then did get called back a bit, which is fine. You know, I wouldn't have wanted to sit on the sidelines.

Maggie Lynch

So, one of the things that our listeners often want to know is, how did you get involved with writing? You know, were you always someone who wanted to write books, wrote stories as children and just really loved expressing yourself? Or was it more, you know, after you got into graduate school, and you were probably writing a lot. I know I was writing a lot in graduate school. And you needed a different outlet. What kind of inspired you? Got you going?

Melissa Yuan-Innes

I always wanted to write, like, if you look at my school files, I don't know what to call them. But you know, where you keep your, your pictures and your report cards and stuff like that. So ever since I was about five, I wanted to be a writer. But that's not an Asian thing to do—to just be like, Oh, I'm just gonna go off and pick a job that has no guarantee of success and no financial security. So I was just, like, I knew I was gonna go to university. I knew I wanted to have a career that would I would be able to support myself.

I've also been with my husband, you know, then he was my boyfriend, since high school. And he has said that he would support me if I want to write. But it just never occurred to me that I would be like, Oh, yeah, I'm going to stay home and let my spouse take care of the bills. So, for me, I was just like, I'm going to support myself. I'm going to be my own patron, and do this. And then when I'm done [with my career], I'm done.

Maggie Lynch

Well, I think a lot of women can kind of identify with that. In any case, you know, I think the time of women feeling like they can 100% rely on a partner to be there for them their whole life and support them is pretty rare. So, I like that you made those decisions. Do you have any regrets that you couldn't get into writing earlier? Now that you are in—what are you, like 50-60 books in at this point?

Melissa Yuan-Innes

That would include a lot of my short stories and stuff. So, when I counted it up, like I guess I have under 20 novels. So I still have a long way to go. If it's, like, compared to some other people, I have really slowed down since having children. I have to say, like, a lot of energy and time goes into, you know, really taking care of your kids; and they don't stay little forever.

So I, you know, I do tell people that if you can get a supportive partner that is the best thing. But, for sure, I guess, as you say, I don't think any man or woman or, you know, non-binary person can necessarily predict the future and say that you're gonna be able to have somebody look out for you your whole life. So, for me, it was the best choice. Like, I would always be anxious if I knew that I was one relationship away from not being able to look after myself.

Also, it gives me something to write about. Like, when I was just a full-time doctor, when I went into my office and I was just, like, I'm going to write and medicine is going to give me stuff to write about. Which was true; but I underestimated just how much time and energy would go into it. I mean, I knew it was going to be intense, but just all consuming. I mean, when I was doing surgery, you know, I'd be sitting there retracting, and I would just try to think, like, one line—just one line of poetry in my head per day. Because otherwise, you know, I would, like never think writing. I remember having supper at, like, 7pm. Like, it just wasn't possible to get stuff done.

But, um, for me, I don't regret it. I think you can never predict what's gonna happen, you know. There are people who've had health crises, or, you know, they've lost their partner. I knew I couldn't spend 100 hours a week doing it [medicine] anymore. But for me, I just like, you know, it has been pretty good to me. I have a terrific family, you know, I can't complain.

Maggie Lynch

Oh, wonderful. One of the things you and I have chatted about before, has been the need for more diverse characters in novels. And I think that's something that you certainly seem to do. Can you just talk a little bit about, you know, why that's important to you? And, you know, what is your approach to that, particularly when you're putting in a character that is not of your particular background,

Melissa Yuan-Innes

I guess I never really thought about it. I just always wanted to see more diversity. And the other thing I would add was that I was attracted to writing because I love reading so much, you know. It's my number one source of entertainment. You know, other people love movies, or they're really into sports. Like, that wasn't my thing. I just love words.

But I was frustrated as a kid, you know. There weren't any stories about people of color. Except a very few. For some reason, African American literature is a bit more of a market. So, I would see that in Canada; but otherwise very, very little. And so, I would read stories about overweight girls, because they were outside the norm, physically, even if

they weren't actually a different race. And when I started reading romance, I was also really hungry for diverse characters. And I would read about, like, I read one case of a slave who escaped, also African American. And I really enjoyed that. Because I was just like, finally, somebody who's different, somebody who's not a white virgin, especially in the Renaissance, and stuff like that. So, I was never into the Regencies because I always wanted feminism and diversity and a more modern perspective. Like I said, an independent attitude. So that's what I brought with my writing.

I've always enjoyed writing different characters, and made a point of doing different backgrounds. Until I read in *Glamour* magazine, there was a survey of films like mainstream films. I guess it must have been a 2007 survey. Anyway, it was the year that *Avatar* came out. And like almost everybody was white. A little bit of African American, little bit of Latinx, and so few Asians. The *Avatar* aliens had equal screen time with Asians. So, your chances of being blue are the same chance of being Asian on any mainstream film in the 21st century. And I was like, wow, that's terrible, you know. Like, in outer space diversity is better than what we're seeing here on Earth. This is ridiculous.

So that was when I made a point, I just made more of an emphasis of seeing it. Montreal is a really diverse city. So, for example, that was where I got to know Jewish culture better. I'd always read about it, but I didn't, you know, see bakeries and have friends who were Jewish. And it just wasn't as common as it was in Montreal. Like a really strong presence. And immigrants from other countries and everything. My patients would be much more diverse in Montreal. So that was just reality. So, I tried to reflect that in my stories.

Maggie Lynch

Well, and I really appreciate it. One of the things I do like about your Hope Sze books is the fact that the main character is Asian. Much like you, I don't see a lot of literature with Asian leads. In movies we've seen a little more recently, but it's still not as widespread, at least in America, as the Asian population is. Which is pretty, pretty large. And I imagine in Canada it is as well. Is that the case or not?

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Yeah, it depends where you are again. So, you know, Toronto, Vancouver, West Coast and in major cities you will see Asian people. But not so much in the country where I am now. You know, it all depends, but certainly we're not represented. You know, the movie *Crazy Rich Asians* was a big deal. Like a landmark movie. And they said, it hadn't been since the *Joy Luck Club* that we've had an all-Asian cast. And that was in 1999. So, we had to wait at least two decades for it to happen again. They're hoping that we can open the floodgates now, but it's still a struggle.

Maggie Lynch

I think that Asians, at least in America, have not advocated for themselves as something separate but equal. You know, it seems to me that the culture has been more to fit in, as opposed to the African American culture which has very much advocated for itself. And the Native Americans have become much more aware of the need for advocacy. But

Asians, until very recently, haven't seem to be as universal about advocacy. That's a really interesting dilemma about diversity.

Melissa Yuan-Innes

I'd like it's assimilation, right? Like, one way to try and fit in is by assimilating and being good; and hoping that you don't get ported off to the camps, like the Japanese Americans were during World War Two. But not German Americans, you know, right?

Maggie Lynch

Very much so. So, I'd like to kind of just take a little veer off into your nonfiction. You mentioned at the top of our discussion about the doctor books. Which are interesting and fun. I've read a couple of them. So, I just want to let all people who are listening here know, they are funny. You know, you really have a great sense of humor. And even though it appears that something horrible is happening, you know, you're really kind of taking it in stride and making fun of it; or just being extremely interested in it. So, again, I assume that that comes out of your residency experience. Because, at least the first one certainly seems to be, you know, with a resident as the primary person. Is that accurate?

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Yeah, the very first book, *The Most Unfeeling Doctor in the World*, kind of dips back and forth between my early career and medical school and residency. And, I want to bring up the point, because you had said that my books aren't gory. It's true.

I remember one of the writer panels, at a conference, they were talking about this. And I didn't realize that there's such a divide between cozy mysteries and thrillers. I probably should have recognized this. But for me, as long as it's a good book, I don't really care what genre it is. And I read really widely. But at Bouchercon [World Mystery Convention], there was a panel and they were like, well, are your books, you know, really intense? And will you describe things in a very, you know, blood and guts kind of way? And I was, like, in medicine it's more a question of troubleshooting. You know, you see what's happening; but it's not talking about the glistening blood or, you know, that eyeball. It's really just checking airway, breathing, circulation. What can I fix first? You know, how many people are in trouble? How can I deal with this?

It's true, I do use a lot of humor, actually, both in fiction and nonfiction. But I guess I do it more in my nonfiction, because, you know, it gets tough being a doctor, or any healthcare professional. You do see a lot. And that's one way to cope, to find the grace and the humor, and the good things. And that's kind of how I look for life in general. I'm pretty optimistic in some ways, and I don't think I could have made it this far if I wasn't.

Maggie Lynch

Well, and I have to say that you're very good at writing humor, you know, that's the other part of it, because I think it's very difficult to write. And it's, maybe it is a reflection of you, because you do see the

humor in life. And so, it's maybe easier for you to write that, but I just so appreciate it.

Also, these books, the doctor books are fairly short compared to the novels; which, I think is nice for people that are looking for something that's just kind of quicker read and interesting. You do not have to be a doctor or a nurse, or work in medicine to really appreciate them. I found them just wonderful. Just kind of, you know, watching the progression and the things that you ran into in the emergency room. And, I believe it is a realistic look at, you know, physicians and the myriad of people that come through the door, with their problems, big and small. Some people make a big deal out of small things, and others don't make a deal of big things. And I think you reflect that really well.

You also have a few helpful books that you've written. I think one of the ones I remember was on toe nail fungus.

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Oh gosh, I actually don't think that I've written that. I wish I knew more about toe nail fungus. Maybe your thinking of *The Emergency Doctor's guides—The Emergency Doctors Guide to a Pain Free Back*, and *The Emergency Doctor's Guide to Healing Dry Eyes*. So, back pain is just super common. And you know, up to a third of emergency room visits are for back pain. And it's like 80% of adults will have back pain at some point in their life. It doesn't have to be all the time, but just at least one episode. So, again, I tried to talk about it with humor. For example, I made a cartoon of a woman saying: "You're 18. Congratulations." You know, the whole kind of back pays everything. And, also, for dry eyes because I suffer from dry eyes. And a lot of women do too. And of course, reading and working with screens and everything like that just puts you at higher risk. So, I wanted to get the information out in a very clear, fun down to earth way.

Maggie Lynch

Again, I find them really helpful. Boy, now I'm gonna have to go back and look for that one because I could have sworn you wrote it.

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Oh, gosh, I did write a one of the essays in Tony's book. And one of my Unfeeling Doctor books is called *A Pain in the Toenails*. I don't know if that was confusing at all. It's in there because there was a patient who, among other things, ended up asking me to trim her nails.

Maggie Lynch

Ah, okay. Yeah, well, maybe that's where I saw it. It's been a while since I've read any of your Unfeeling Doctor series.

So, you had said before that you're sticking with the Hope Sze medical crime series. I see you are continuing to write those books. Are there any other genres that you're also planning to write?

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Well, I do want to get my fantasy and science fiction stories done as well. And I publish short stories. So, there should be a collection of my

fantasy and science fiction short stories that will come out this year. Um, and not a different genre, but I did want to do more cozy-inclined mysteries. I do want to write the third book in my Assassins series. The first book is *The Italian School for Assassins*; and the second book is *The Goa Yoga School of Slayers*. And in that series Octavia is 40 years old. For her 40th birthday, she's like, just what's the craziest thing I can do? And her best friend suggests to go to Florence to try out the Italian school for assassins as a joke. But it turns out, the school is really serious. So, the second book actually ends on a cliffhanger. And I did want to write the third book, which is the *Chinese Cooking School of Carnage*. But I just haven't gotten around to it.

Maggie Lynch

Oh, I love the titles! I remember the cover for that first one, *The Italian School for Assassins*. I have to admit I haven't read that one. Well, that's great. I'm glad to hear that you're going to be doing that. And those are more kind of cozy and humorous style, right?

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Yes, yes. Much more light mystery and humorous. In the other books, Hope Sze sees sad things. I mean, obviously as a physician and in her crime work. But in these books, Octavia, you know, she's just running around, and she gets to go to all different countries, learning assassin skills which she doesn't use, which is really fun. So, for the third book, I was, like, I really would like to go to China. And I did manage to get to Taiwan before the pandemic, but I haven't gotten to China yet.

Maggie Lynch

Wow. Well, I think that'll be great fun. And we'll look forward to that third book for sure.

So, I don't have any other questions for you. Is there anything you wish I would have asked you that you'd like to share with our listeners?

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Oh, I mean, you've asked such great questions already. I guess I just hope to meet new people and meet new readers, especially your readers, people who appreciate the thought and care we put into the books. And I really appreciate the time that you've taken today.

Maggie Lynch

Well, thank you so much for being here. So, you can get in touch with Melissa at her website, melissayuaninnes.com and I will have that in the show notes if you don't remember it. And I'll also have a display of a couple of her books. I hope you check it out. She has many different types of books. So, whether you like romance, mysteries, humor, thrillers, you'll probably find something in Melissa's collection. So, thank you so much for spending time with us today, Melissa.

Melissa Yuan-Innes

Thank you so much, Maggie. Really appreciate it.