

Chin, C. (2023). *Everything I Learned, I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant*. Little Brown and Company.

Review by Tracy Floreani

Curtis Chin's memoir lands at an opportune moment, when both food writing and memoir are experiencing a boom in the publishing world and among the foodie reading public. Chin's personal story seems likely to be put in conversation with other popular Asian American food writing, such as Momofuku Noodle Bar founder David Chang's *Eat a Peach* and the Anthony Bourdain-produced/composite-authored *L.A. Son*, about Korean taco truck celeb Roy Choi. Unlike these titles, though, which focus on the making of celebrity chefs, Chin's memoir flips the script and details the making of an ordinary person from the second home of a Chinese kitchen in Detroit in the 1970s and '80s. The story is deeply place-based, moving away from the predictable settings of New York, California, or culinary training abroad, and brings to life both the physical space of the restaurant where he spent most of his non-school hours and Detroit's multi-ethnic community during a time of great change.

To be clear, this is not a book of food writing. Brief descriptions of homemade snacks, restaurant specialties, and special off-menu family entrées pepper the story, but food is not the focus of the narrative nor the author's *raison d'être*. Simple descriptors like "tasty" and "delicious" appear a bit too frequently as stand-ins for more nuanced, sensory-filled descriptions, but the book's use of food is more symbolic, anyway. Here, food functions as part of the setting, part of the family culture, and even as a love-language during times of conflict. In her study *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature*, Wenying Xu asserts that "table narrative" in Asian American texts serves as a "site of economic, cultural, and political struggle, not as a site to produce self-exoticism or food pornography" (p. 14). Indeed, Chin's book serves up plenty of economic, political, and cultural struggle. By structuring the book in chapters that mimic the sections and numbered dishes of a Chinese menu, he hints at the ways in which the family restaurant structured his sense of self and possibilities. The memoir is full of pathos, including both a self-deprecating humor, as he recounts his experiences as a naive child who didn't always fit in with his family or community, and a palpable sense of fear that increasingly pervaded everyday life in the neighborhood surrounding Chung's Restaurant. This fear grew out of the increasingly violent crime accompanying the crack epidemic in tandem with a spate of reactionary, anti-Asian hate crimes when the Japanese auto industry's new success in the U.S. weakened the labor market in the Motor City. As he describes his pitch of the book in interviews, "come for the egg rolls, stay for the talk on racism."

The story moves chronologically from his family migration to Detroit a century ago, to his earliest childhood memories in the back kitchen, through his high school and college days, to his long-awaited launch into coming out and coming into adulthood. The narrative voice and tone evolves over the course of the book, too, from goofy and childishly joking toward more sober

contemplations of place, race, and identity as Chin reaches his teen years. While there is plenty of family story, the book is rich with the contexts of this period and subtly develops into both a deeply personal memoir and a frank, unromanticized love letter to the struggling city of Detroit. He poignantly notes at one point, “It must be sad to grow up in a city that has always been poor. It was even sadder to grow up in one that was formerly rich” (p.122). Woven into the story are many brief explorations that bring the period back to life: the multiple forces pushing the city into decline; rallying moments of Detroit sports triumphs; lighthearted escapism into popular culture and the worlds of Bruce Lee and John Hughes movies; the political climate of the Reagan era; and the new horizons glimpsed with the fall of the Berlin Wall. His representation of his own maturing outlook comes through especially in how the narrative voice becomes more controlled and insightful in his teen years as he details his growing awareness of the vulnerabilities presented by his intersectional identities. He deftly illustrates the complexities of his own thinking as he came to understand his sexuality but also felt the need to remain closeted both within his traditional family culture and in the life-or-death context of the AIDS epidemic at its height. Simultaneously, the violent, public murder of Vincent Chin (a family friend) made all of Detroit’s Asian American population afraid to leave their homes, but also spurred their outrage and moved them to join in public demonstrations for civil rights. It is during this period that the author pinpoints his move toward politically-inflected writing: “Organizing my thoughts into sentences and then paragraphs renewed my faith in the American political process. I went from being a passive victim to an active participant” (p. 106). The narrative also feels very honest throughout, as Chin openly shares anecdotes of behaviors he is not particularly proud of, works to understand his own flirtations with being a young Randian conservative, and examines his willingness to remain deeply closeted for longer than felt comfortable.

Social class isn’t the centerpiece of the story, but Chin’s intersectional identity certainly includes “working-class.” Class-consciousness and the family’s moves toward upward mobility are throughlines of the story. While his parents joined an established, multi-partner family business, they clearly struggled throughout Chin’s childhood, working long hours 364 days of the year and maintaining one beat-up van used to haul both restaurant supplies and deliveries as well as their six children and a set of grandparents in the rolling, seatless cargo space. As he describes his childhood, “most of my clothes were hand-me-downs and all of my toys were time-shares” (p. 82); “everyday was Take Your Kid to Work day” (p. 32). The family outings to a movie or a mall could likely be counted on one hand. As sirens became “the new Motown sound” (p. 122), more and more families moved out of the small Chinatown, and Chin’s parents saved enough to join the exodus. He describes the extended family’s move to a house in a small town about twenty minutes away from the restaurant, only to face a *Raisin in the Sun*-style attempt by neighbors to push them out of the majority-white community. And while the ten of them moved into a middle-class, split-level house, the resulting lifestyle was definitely not that of his schoolmates: “Our house resembled a northern outpost of the restaurant. Usually, it was a big mess, with unopened bills littering the kitchen counter, dirty aprons and napkins in the laundry room, boxes of paper supplies cluttering the halls” (p. 45). While their father, a fourth-generation American and college dropout, was content with his lifestyle and the choices his kids wanted to make for their futures, their mother had other ideas. Newly married and arriving in Detroit from Hong Kong at seventeen, her choices had been limited. She was determined that her children move up in social class through education.

The “everything I learned” of the title really comes to bear once Chin reluctantly agrees to go to college. In his childhood, the lessons were more overt: learning lessons from his own misbehavior, learning the art of strategy and “building momentum” from observing his mother play mahjong (p.90), learning how to prepare food (which, oddly enough, his parents didn’t teach him, so he finagled lessons from one of their hired wok cooks on whom he had a crush). As the chapters set in college unfold, he seems to recognize all the implicit learning of his past as he adapts to new surroundings. Readers look back with him on the lessons gleaned through constant observation in a restaurant that served a cross section of all of Detroit’s population, from the local political elite, to the random tourist, to the prostitutes who worked the nearby red light Corridor. Wenying Xu notes that the power of food lies in its role as “the most significant medium of the traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies, [it] organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self in distinction from others who practice different foodways” (p. 2). We witness this embodied knowledge coming to bear in Chin’s life as he learns, through food-based interactions, how to connect with people from different cultures (even if they resist connection), how to work with powerful people and be civically engaged, how best to respond to racist behaviors, and, ultimately, how to develop his voice as a writer.

Reviewer Bio

Tracy Floreani is professor of English at Oklahoma City University where she teaches American literature and academic writing. She also serves as Director of the Jeanne Hoffman Smith Center for Film and Literature, OCU’s public humanities initiative, and as president of MELUS. She is the author of *Fifties Ethnicities: The Ethnic Novel and Mass Culture at Midcentury* (2013), editor of the MLA *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ralph Ellison* (2024), and is currently working on a biography of Fanny McConnell Ellison.