

Chung, N. (2023) *A Living Remedy*. Harper Collins.

Review by **Renny Christopher**

Nicole Chung's *A Living Remedy* won the Working-Class Studies Association's 2024 Tillie Olsen Award for Creative Writing¹ and was also selected as one of the NY Times Book Review's 100 Notable Books of 2023; it is well deserving of these and all the other recognitions it has received. *A Living Remedy* is simply a beautiful book, although certainly not a simple book. It is a memoir of Chung's experience of losing her adoptive parents over the span of two years. Her father died first, at 67, in part due to never having received adequate care for diabetes and kidney disease. Her mother died of cancer during the COVID lockdown. Chung's narrative takes these bald facts and weaves them into a story of love in the context of precarity, interracial adoption, upward mobility, and the broken-down nightmare that is the U.S. healthcare system. The book is moving, brutally honest, and tells an important story.

Chung was born to Korean-American parents and put up for adoption. She tells the story of the search for her birth parents in an earlier book, *All You Can Ever Know* (2018), which is also well worth reading. That book focuses more on race and family, while also touching on class, with the experience of being adopted at its center. *A Living Remedy* focuses on Chung's adoptive family, her experience of upward mobility as she goes to college, marries, joins the professional middle class, and has children of her own, with the difficult deaths of her parents at its center.

After her father's death Chung began writing the book to deal with her grief; before the book was finished her mother also died, and so it became the story of both losses, each devastating in its own way.

Interwoven through the narrative is Chung's own upward mobility story. She was born in Seattle; her adoptive parents took her to rural southern Oregon, a very white part of the country and a very economically depressed part of the country, especially in the late 20th century. Her father managed a series of pizza restaurants; her mother worked first as a respiratory therapist and later in low-level office jobs. Both had health problems. They pieced things together—work, healthcare in the absence of insurance, housing. Chung writes of the family when she was in high school, “we no longer lived *paycheck to paycheck*, as my mother had once told me, but *emergency to emergency*” (p. 16).

¹ For a full list of WCSA award winners see here: <https://workingclassassn.org/awards/>

As the only Asian student in her classes at school, she grew up not knowing anyone who looked like her—not even her own family. She wanted to get out of southern Oregon, and finally figured out that college was her road out. Her family was opposed to “handouts,” so she paid the fees for her own SAT exams and college applications out of what she made from her part-time job. Many years later she saw the financial aid application her mother had filled out and found that her family’s income was less than the cost of her first year of college. She made it through on financial aid. A familiar story.

What’s not as familiar in working-class narratives of upward mobility is the setting in the rural west. The more common backdrop for such stories is the industrial northeast. Chung’s portrait of rural southern Oregon reminded me in some ways of my own youth in rural California (which was not nearly as white as Chung’s community, but very similar in other ways). This different setting is one of the contributions Chung’s narrative makes to working-class literature.

Another important contribution this book makes is in its indictment of the U.S. healthcare system and the way that lives are shortened for working-class and working-poor people because of their lack of access to adequate healthcare. After Chung graduated from college, married, and remained on the east coast and had two children, both of her parents lost their jobs just at the time that her father’s diabetes begins to cause a steep decline in his health. Reluctantly, he finally applies for social security disability after two years of unemployment, only to be denied, and later denied Medicaid. By the time he finally sees a doctor at a safety-net clinic he has end-stage renal failure, and eventually dies “*a common American death*” (p. 78).

Chung wrestles with guilt and helplessness at being far away, barely getting by while in graduate school and obligated to her own children, and therefore unable to do much to help her parents – feelings familiar to many upwardly-mobile working-class kids. I’ve felt it, although my family’s situation was never nearly as bad as Chung’s family, nor were their interactions with the healthcare system as bad (although they weren’t good). My dad also had diabetes. I remember being with him at an appointment with a diabetes educator who wanted to teach him to count carbs. He asked what a “carb” was, and the educator said, “carbohydrates,” as if that were something everyone should know. My dad said, “I don’t know a carbohydrate from a carburetor.” The diabetes educator did not succeed in explaining. The medical system doesn’t really know how to talk with people who aren’t college graduates, let alone provide adequate treatment.

Chung writes eloquently of grief, and of the complicated grief of an adopted daughter. While she is still deep in her grief over her father’s death, her mother is diagnosed with cancer. And then the pandemic locks everything down, and prevents Chung from being with her mother at the end, as she had desired to be. This book chronicles one of the many, many stories of this kind that took

place in 2020 and 2021. This is another contribution this books makes—it chronicles an experience that was shared by many, and that should not be forgotten.

Chung’s prose is poetic while still being straightforward, and she has included lists within the narrative that hit like gut punches. Her writing is clean without being spare, poetic without being flowery. She conveys experiences that will be unfamiliar to some readers in a way that will provoke empathy and understanding, if not identification.

Overall this is a book that has a lot to offer, and is written from a rare perspective in working-class literature: that of a Korean-American adoptee growing up in a white family in the rural west. I hope that Nicole Chung will continue to write more books, bringing her considerable talent and essential voice even further into the conversations on class, race, adoption, family, healthcare, and love. For above all, this is a book about love.

Reviewer Bio:

Renny Christopher is Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs at Washington State University Vancouver. *A Carpenter’s Daughter* (Sense Publishers, 2009), addresses xyr experiences as the first in xyr family to attend college. Before earning a doctorate, Christopher worked as a printing press operator, typesetter, carpenter and horse wrangler.