

## Previews

### Mara Moustafine



**Made in China** Moustafine recollects growing up in Harbin

Mara Moustafine was born in Harbin in 1954, before her mixed Russian-Jewish-Tartar family emigrated to Australia in 1959. They were among the last of the Harbintsy – Russians who, after fleeing the Russian Civil War, ended up forming a new community in Harbin. Her award-winning memoir, *Secrets and Spies*, traces the history of her family over eighty years and three countries. **James Palmer** hears a brief version

#### What childhood memories do you have of China?

It's difficult to tell which are your own memories, and which are from stories that you heard. I was only four and a bit when we left, after all. My most vivid images are the countryside and the river. When we came to Australia, though, there was a huge Chinese influence in my life; we brought so much Chinoiserie – carved chests, lamps, and so on – and my parents both worked as translators, so we brought lots and lots of books, an entire collection of Chinese calligraphy, brushes, and so on.

#### Why did your parents pick Australia?

We left quite late. When Sino-Soviet relations were in full bloom, people were invited back by Khrushchev to till the so-called 'virgin lands' that were opening up in Siberia, and it was made quite difficult to go elsewhere. My father said, 'No way I'm taking this child to the Soviet Union' – we were getting hints via letters that things were bad, like people saying 'You should come when Mara has finished university' – when I was only two! So we picked Australia instead.

#### What was unique about Harbin?

Harbin was an extraordinary town because it had so many minorities

from the former Tsarist empire – Jews, Poles, Tartars, Ukrainians, you name it, were encouraged to come. St. Petersburg positively encouraged Jews, in particular, to go, and they were eager to because within Russia they were confined by anti-Semitic laws, and limited to settle in certain areas. So it was a frontier town, and people were bound together by shared Russian roots, but also within a melange of different nationalities. It was culturally very rich and quite tolerant. My Jewish maternal grandfather came from a family in Belarus that only spoke Yiddish – a real *shtetl* culture – and though he travelled all over the world, he came back to Harbin. It was a place where people could become modern, a cosmopolitan city.

#### What survives of the Harbintsy today?

The physical appearance, of course. For me, it's the cupolas, which even the new apartments have. Over the last fifteen years, there have been strong efforts to preserve the Russian heritage of the city, too. The church of St. Sophia has been restored as a museum, and so have the two synagogues and the mosque, and the Jewish cemetery. There are still children of mixed marriages there, though the few survivors of the original community I interviewed for my book have sadly died since then. But many Russians still feel a strong bond to Harbin, partially because of that attachment to a pre-revolutionary Russian culture preserved in formaldehyde, but also because it holds the gravestones of their families.

*Mara Moustafine speaks at the Bookworm Literary Festival on Monday 16, as part of Australian Writers' Week 2009. See listings for details.*

## How I write

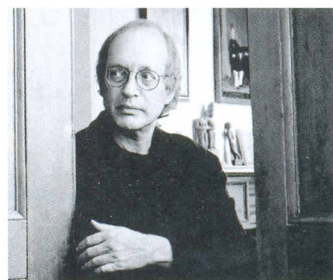
### Eliot Weinberger

**Eliot Weinberger** is a noted American essayist, translator, and super-brain. He won the Mexican Order of the Aztec Eagle, the highest award the Mexican Government gives to foreign nationals, for his translations of the poet Octavio Paz, which he started working on as a teenager. He is also an expert in Chinese poetry, having translated the poetry of Bei Dao, edited an anthology of Chinese poems and written a book about Chinese poetry translation. Recently, he has become known for his genre-bending essays across a bewildering range of subjects.

The essay form strikes me as largely unexplored territory in English. Unlike fiction or poetry, it has never had an avant-garde, and it has been more or less stuck in the same genres for centuries: the first-person investigation, memoir, travel writing, literary criticism etc. In my own work, I start with one rule: all the information must be verifiable. After that, anything goes: many of the essays veer more toward a kind of documentary prose poetry, some are more like traditional fictional narratives.

Basically, the essays are put together in the manner of a hunter-gatherer. I often start out from a specific question (for example, 'When Blake wrote *Tyger*, *Tyger*, had he ever seen an actual tiger?'), which then leads down paths to other kinds of information (tiger-hunting, the image of the tiger in the West, the story of Tipu Sultan, the Tiger of Mysore, etc.). Sometimes I'll be reading something that I know I want to turn into an essay, and then begin researching in more depth.

The literary essays are written out of curiosity, but the political



**Weinberger** Hunter gatherer

ones are written out of indignation. With the election (that is, the selection) of Bush, I felt that, as a citizen, I had to do something – and since I presumably know how to write, I began writing articles for foreign newspapers and magazines on what was happening in the USA. If nothing else, they served to show that the country was not a monolith of opinion.

As I am not a professional pundit, and have no turf to defend on the op-ed page, it's remarkable that – unlike the professionals – nothing I wrote turned out to be wrong. In the first week of the Bush-Cheney Administration, in January 2001, for example, I predicted the invasion of Iraq. And I was not an 'insider' – just a guy who reads the newspapers. But everything that happened in the Bush years was quite plain to see from the very beginning: absolute *laissez-faire* capitalism, the dismantling of the regulatory bureaucracy, cronyism, and so on.

With the nearly unbelievable election of Obama, I am very happily retiring from politics and returning to literature.

*Eliot Weinberger speaks at the Bookworm Literary Festival on Thursday 12. See listings for details.*

## Book wars

### What's selling where in Beijing

#### *Garden Books vs Di San Ji Bookstore*

#### 1. **Brothers: A Novel**

Yu Hua

#### 2. **Twilight**

Stephanie Meyer

#### 3. **The Culture Code**

Clotilde Rapaille

#### 4. **Return to Dragon Mountain**

Jonathan D. Spence

#### 5. **KFC in China: Secret Recipe for Success**

Warren Liu

#### 1. **Talk about Health from Head to Feet**

Qu Liming

#### 2. **Tiny Times 1.0**

Jing M. Guo

#### 3. **Currency War**

Song Hongbing

#### 4. **Accounting Basics**

Textbook

#### 5. **The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People**

Stephen R. Covey

**Garden Books** 44 Guanghua Lu, Chaoyang district (6585 1435; [www.gardenbooks.cn](http://www.gardenbooks.cn)). Open 8am-9pm daily.

**Di San Ji Bookstore** 65 Beisihuan Xi Lu, Haidian district (5128 2300; [www.d3j.com.cn](http://www.d3j.com.cn)). Open 9am-9pm daily.

