

The Faces Behind the Words

The 2009 Bookworm International Literary Festival brings books to life

by Mary Dennis, with additional reporting by Jessica Pan

Books. So much color presented in black and white. Sometimes though, what's printed on the page is just not enough. Sometimes, you'll slam shut a book with more questions than you had when you opened it, wishing the author would just materialize in front of you and have no choice but to answer every one of your astute (or inane) questions. The Bookworm says: ta-dah.



Mara
Moustafine

Mara Moustafine has roots that stretch around the world, which can be handy – if you're a spy. "It's not about trench coats and black fish-net stockings," Moustafine says of her time as an intelligence analyst. While the job title may conjure up images of smoky rooms lit by naked bulbs, she explains that it's actually "hard analytical work, assessing complex political developments on the basis of all available information from both public and secret sources."

Secrets run in Moustafine's

blood – a legacy she reveals in her book, *Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files*. While researching the book, Moustafine delved through the secret police files of her grandmother's family. "They left China to escape the Japanese occupation in the 1930s, only to be caught in Stalin's purges. I came face to face with the oppression, injustice and crushing violence that result when human rights are trampled," she says. "I also learned the spirit and courage of ordinary people caught up by geopolitical forces beyond their control."

Born in Harbin, Moustafine moved to Australia when she was five, the last leg of a three-generation exodus that took her family "from the villages of the Tsarist empire to a frontier city in China, and then to far-flung English-speaking Australia." Before finally settling down, Moustafine's parents and

grandparents lived through some of the most turbulent events of the 20th century, including the Bolshevik Revolution and Civil War in Russia, the Japanese occupation of north China and the Chinese Communist Revolution.

Moustafine's family history, and an identity that has certainly been shaped by her family's roots in three different cultures – "Byelorussian Jewish, Tatar Moslem and Russian Orthodox" – makes for the kind of worldliness suited to a writer, diplomat, intelligence analyst, journalist, business executive and a director of a global human rights organization.

This is exactly what Moustafine has become, but she has pulled all these pieces together into a single focus. "Each of the roles was interesting in its own way," she says. "What tied them all together was a focus on international work."

HS Liu has been immersed in China's history since his birth, and taking pictures of it since Mao's death. The Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist has captured some of the most iconic photographs of China ever published – yet he isn't interested by most photography books on China. "I don't see a China I recognize, in a very kind of abstract way," he says.

So Liu compiled his own book, *China: Portrait of a Country*. Born in Hong Kong to mainland parents, Liu spent his early years in Fujian province before attending Hunter College in New York City, where he began a career in photojournalism that would include extensive work for *Time* and AP. Liu's diametrical experiences allowed him to straddle two worlds, pairing an insider's un-

derstanding of China's recent history with a professional outsider's objectivity. The dual perspective that has distinguished Liu throughout his career now serves to set his book apart from the rest.

"I don't think an image can ever be completely separate from an understanding of history," Liu says. "You need to have other references of China rather than relying solely on images." With that in mind, he has created a book that is more than a series of photographs. It is a visual history lesson of the events, moods, and daily life that was China from 1949 on – all of it captured by Chinese photographers.

Liu was careful not to blow out of proportion events whose fame was greater than their impact. As an apt example he points out how the famine of 1958-60, during which

20-30 million people died, is often overshadowed by more dramatic incidents that took fewer lives.

Liu makes an effort not to distort history this way, and is careful to base his selections on more than just face value. "I always instinctively work with twin criteria," he explains. "Visually [each] has to stand as a photograph. That in itself is not enough. This picture must also help the narrative. And this narrative of China – the New China – has to be closest to what I feel is what really happened."



HS Liu