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Smoke & Flowers: An Interview with Olivia Boler

by Wei Ming Dariotis

Olivia Boler's first novel, *Year of the Smoke Girl*, was published in 2000, by Dry Bones Press. It was a *Library Journal* bestseller, described by poet and activist Gary Snyder as a "dense weave in the cross-cultural multi-racial world of complex, educated hip contemporary coast-to-coast America...It is a fine first novel, rich in paradox and detail." Boler has published short stories in the Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWAA) anthology *Cheers to Muses*, the literary journal *MARY*, and *Facets Magazine*, among others. She contributes to *The Noe Valley Voice*, a free newspaper serving the Noe Valley community, and her writing was also part of the AAWAA exhibit, "A Place of Her Own" at the de Young Museum in San Francisco in January 2009. Boler's second novel, *The Flower Bowl Spell*, was just published as an ebook. Both of her novels feature mixed heritage Chinese American protagonists.

On Thursday, March 22, 2012, Wei Ming Dariotis interviewed Olivia Boler at Café XO, at the nexus of Glen Park and Noe Valley, in San Francisco.

AALDP: When did you become a writer?

Olivia Boler: My father is a writer. When I was a little girl he had an agent and he had written a novel. He was an ESL teacher at City College, and, having summers off, he would write at his desk. So I think that influenced me. The thing I liked to do most was to write stories and read—I'm a big reader. When I was 6, my dad gave me the *Little House on the Prairie* books, and, for some reason, *Freaky Friday*. It was over my head, but I loved it. By the time I was a pre-teen, that book was falling apart, taped back together. I also loved Judy Blume's books, of course. I got to meet her at my 10th College reunion at Mt. Holyoke, and she was the commencement speaker. She asked me to sign a copy of *Year of the Smoke Girl*, which I was promoting at the time, and I asked her to sign my teenage copy of *Tiger Eyes*, which I treasure.

AALDP: Are you inspired by any Asian American writers?

OB: Recently, I read Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation*. It's really a really powerful, moving story of the Chinese American immigrant experience with a strong female protagonist. It really rings true and resonated with the life of one of my best childhood friends, an AB

I'm looking for recommendations of Asian American writers, Chinese American, especially. I saw Amy Chua, the author of *Confessions of a Tiger*

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Mom, and she was really funny and self-deprecating. The public skewered her because of that excerpt in the *Wall Street Journal*, but if you actually read the book, you see that character assassination was completely unfair. I related to her memoir as a mother, but also as the daughter of a Chinese mother.

Because I'm a fiction writer, I'm looking for stories that connect on a more human level, not just a racial level—the every day of being a person struggling with the regular stuff of life, or romance, or adventure and the characters just happen to be half Asian or all Asian or whatever.

AALDP: How do you choose to identify yourself?

OB: I have always identified as half Chinese and half Caucasian. The term “Hapa” I hadn't learned until I was 23, from the poet Gary Snyder, my professor at UC Davis. His wife is Japanese American, and he was on my thesis committee for my MA in creative writing. He explained it to me as meaning half Asian and that it came from the Hawaiian term “hapa haole.” To be honest, I grew up in San Francisco, a very Asian city—my mother is Chinese from China and speaks three dialects: Cantonese, Mandarin, and Sichuan, which she calls her “baby dialect.” Sometimes on the weekends we'd go to Chinatown or Clement Street and have dim sum and meet her brother or friends. They would speak mostly Cantonese, but never to me, so I didn't pick it up. I feel sad about that. But I still identify myself as Chinese American. I think language is important to identity, of course, but other things influence it, too—like the food you grow up eating and cooking, and who is around you, raising you and giving you your sense of self, your values. These are more important even than how you look, because I don't look Asian; I look Mediterranean or Latina.

AALDP: Do you feel accepted by other people as Chinese or as Chinese American?

OB: The short answer is, “sometimes.” This is all in my head—no one has ever come up to me and said, “you're not Chinese!”

This has come up recently because my kids are in Mandarin immersion school. A woman who was Taiwanese came up to me at a school event and asked why I was interested in having my kids in the program. When I told her I was Chinese, she gave me this very dubious look and said, “Maybe your mother isn't all Chinese?” Which I think would have annoyed my mother immensely.

There is still a hierarchy around Asians from Asia, Asian Americans, and the mixed race people. Yet I'm seeing so many more mixed people, especially in San Francisco. It's fantastic.

AALDP: Regarding *Year of the Smoke Girl* and the protagonist, Khatia Quigley, why did you choose to have the “surprise” ending, the mystery of the relationship between the mother and father?

OB: At the time, in my early 20s, that was what was on my mind—identity. It still is, to a degree, and I've always been fascinated and maybe even puzzled

by the way identity connects to the way you look. I had read an article on Asian women getting eyelid surgery for a fold and the idea that beauty is defined by Western standards. I was inspired to use that in the novel, but I felt the issue has very complex and sometimes dark origins, which I explored through the plot of the book. My father had been drafted during the Korean War, though he didn't actually serve, and I had an uncle, his brother, who did serve and was wounded. There were left over feelings by some members of my family about what my uncle went through, and those feelings were directed towards Asians. But back to the surgery: Someone close to me actually wound up getting that eyelid surgery done. I'm not making judgments about whether cosmetic surgery is good or bad just for cosmetic reasons, because I think it can be brave to make that choice to change your appearance, but if you can love yourself for the way you are made, I think that is brave, too.

AALDP: And what motivated the character's bisexuality?

OB: Without going into too much detail, it was inspired by some things that happened in college to some friends of mine at our all-women's college—Mt. Holyoke. I grew up in SF, surrounded by gay people, even in my own family—in particular I'm thinking of a cousin who is now a professor of Theory and Policy Studies, Megan Boler, and my great-uncle, Phillip Roeber, who was like a grandfather to me. So of course, I accepted them for what they were and knew that their feelings were genuine and natural. But when I went to college, which was so isolated and insular, I questioned whether the attraction some of my friends had to other women was about the environment or about their true nature. Twenty years later, I think it was a little of both, depending on the situation and the individuals.

AALDP: Tell me about your most recent book, *The Flower Bowl Spell*.

OB: It's available as an ebook and paperback, and it is very different from *Year of the Smoke Girl*. It's about a mixed race Chinese American young woman whose name is Memphis Zhang. She's from San Francisco, and it just so happens she's a witch or Wiccan. She has banished magic from her life because a friend of hers has died from a spell gone bad—or so our heroine thinks. So she's living a "normal" life that isn't really that normal. She had been raised in a Wiccan coven by mostly white people and her "Asian Auntie." But then fairies start to show up at the Castro Street Muni station. Dangerous and magical things start to happen and adventures ensue.

The thing that got me interested in writing about an Asian American witch—and yeah, she does follow the Celtic traditions—was a Samhain celebration I had read about in *The Noe Valley Voice*. I decided to attend, and no surprise, it was mostly white people in attendance, but there was one Asian American woman, and I just wondered what she was doing there. I mean, I don't know a lot about the demographics of pagan religions in the Bay Area, but I still found it surprising, and as far as I know, she and I were the only Asians at this party. It made me think, what if you were an Asian American witch, growing up in this Bay Area hippie culture? What would that be like? And then, adding the paranormal aspects just made it more fun.

In this book, I wanted to center on an Asian American character, but also wanted it to be relatable to a wider audience, and maybe to cross over to younger readers. I am also writing a young adult prequel with the same character as well as a sequel.

AALDP: How would one get a copy of your book?

OB: *The Flower Bowl Spell* (2012) is in paperback on Amazon, CreateSpace, or ask your favorite local bookstore or library to order it. It is also available as an ebook on amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com, iTunes/iBookstore, kobobooks.com, and smashwords.com.

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