

by Andrew Sun

According to an old Chinese saying, a "many-mouthed bird" is someone who speaks indiscreetly. It is customarily accepted and expected that the affairs of a Chinese household should always be kept private and hidden, whether good or bad. In essence, self-repression is a virtue.

From that virtue, the voices of Chinese people in this country have almost never been heard, especially those who have the most to say. This may very well change as a new generation of Chinese-descended artists blossom into many-mouthed birds.

*Many-Mouthed Birds*, a new anthology published by Douglas & McIntyre, presents a diverse spectrum of Chinese Canadian writers across this country. Yet the selections, edited by Vancouver writers Bennett Lee and Jim Wong-Chu, share only one main attribute: they are written in Gwei-lo's language, English.

Foreign people in a foreign land, writing in a foreign language as many-mouthed birds of a new feather stuck between two flocks.

While most of the writers deal with topics culturally specific to being Chinese, several inclusions deny any hint of Asian attachment. These exceptions tend to be the most sterile and pedantic. Fortunately, there are few of them. The rest of the book reveals people, both strong and fragile, at a crossroads in their lives.

The sense of breaching tradition is implicit in nearly all the stories. A whole generation of Chinese Canadians feels a tremendous sense of loss (and also of wonderment) because it is reexamining its community's philosophy of life: work hard, accept the harsh realities of life, accept your place, don't make trouble and be prosperous for the sake of the family.

This collection is uneven, with the prose faring slightly better than the poems. Several of the selections display a deeply moving intimacy and a remarkable level of emotional control. Paradoxically, they are also the most sentimental.

The most effective tales are of parents and grandparents in transition to the new world — the people who have never told their tales. From Wayson Choy's modern fable "The Jade Peony," about a young boy's grandmother preparing for her death, to Garry Engkent's 70-year-old mother finally getting her Canadian citizenship in "Why My Mother Can't Speak English," to Denise Chong's tragic tale of family separation and reunion in "The Concubine's Children," the stories are concerned with filling in family histories from first arrival to the present.

If the details appear melancholy, be assured they're not all melodramatic.

"Perhaps I am not Chinese anymore to understand why my mother would want to take in the sorrow, the pain, and the anguish and then recount them every so often. Once I was presumptuous to ask her why she would want to remember in such details. She said that memories didn't hurt anymore."

This is from "Why My Mother Can't Speak English" by Garry Engkent.

As the writers are from a displaced generation, isolation is also a significant theme in the anthology (an alternative title could have been "Disoriented Orientals"). It is explored as a physical fact in Paul Yee's "Prairie Night 1939," as a psychological struggle in "Glass" by Evelyn Lau and as a formal structure in

Laiwan's poem, "The Imperialism of Syntax," in which the writer examines her own disenfranchisement through the impossibility of accurately translating her work to Chinese. Unable to fly free from the Western nest of

influence nor able to fully comprehend their own heritage, many-mouthed birds must forever be questioning and negotiating their identity.

In the still British colony of Hong Kong, a measure of cultural inde-

pendence is retained by the sheer mass of Chinese speakers. But in North America, the Asian language — especially the written word — is an endangered idiom. The warning signs ironically are echoed in English by

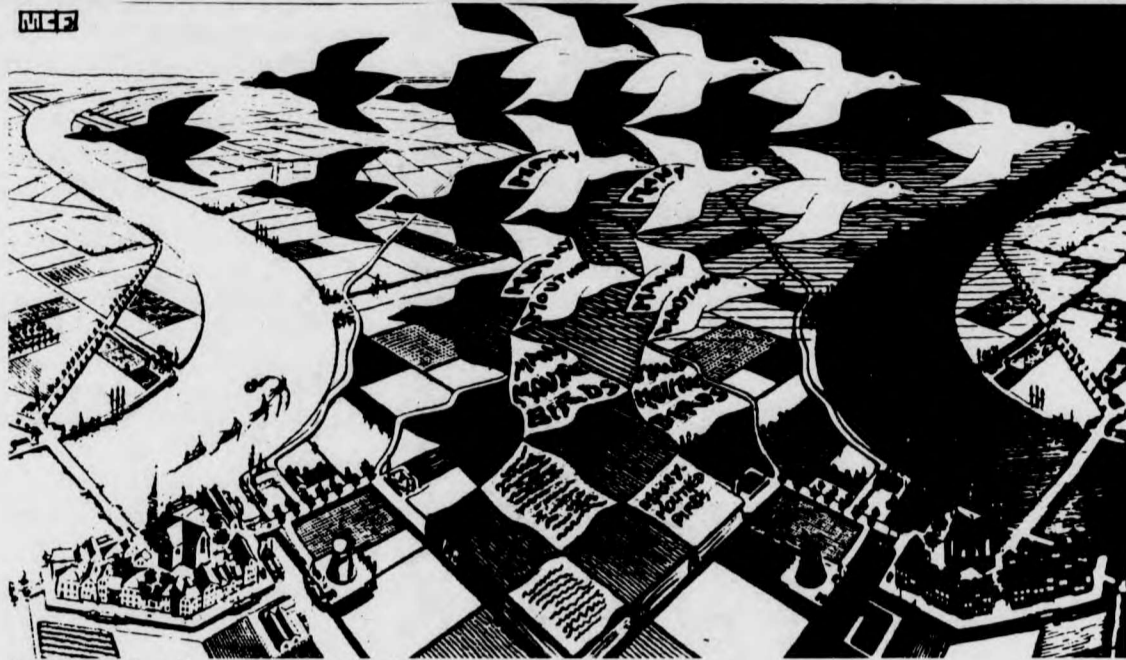
several pieces in *Many Mouthed-Birds*:

"to tell you the truth  
I feel very much at home  
in your embarrassment  
don't be afraid  
Like you  
I too was mired in another language  
and I gladly surrendered it  
for English  
you too  
in time  
will lose your mother's tongue"  
— from "How Feel I Do?" by Jim Wong-Chu

If the resigned determinism of the lines seems disturbing, it seems to be a Chinese characteristic as commonplace as leaving one's homeland to work in a foreign country with little hope of seeing your wife, family and children for many years.

## BOOK

**Many-Mouthed Birds**  
edited by Bennett Lee and Jim Wong-Chu  
published by Douglas & McIntyre



graphic by M. Escher, with additional work by Lee Romberg

## Praise Harry! Now the truth can be revealed

by Ira Nayman

"Only once in ten years, if we're very lucky, does a book like *The Boomer Bible* come along.<sup>1</sup> It's the kind of book that makes you laugh, makes you angry, makes you question, makes you cringe, makes you think and shout yes! in agreement.<sup>2</sup> It's the kind of book that thoroughly defines its times, and it's the kind of book a whole generation will be talking about.

"Without heresy or sacrilege<sup>3</sup> R. F. Laird has appropriated the most popular format in the history of Western letters to explain the beliefs and values we live by today, and everything that went into forming them — from literature to psychoanalysis, from religion to relativity to TV. He captures the conflict of the Boomer era — of growing up with the Ten Commandments, the Four Gospels and the Golden Rule,<sup>4</sup> and coming of age in the era of sex, drugs and gimme gimme gimme. And he tells lots of great jokes — the kinds of jokes Lenny Bruce might have told, or Mark Twain, or Jonathan Swift, or Rabelais or Aristophanes.<sup>5</sup>

"*The Boomer Bible* is a dazzling invention, a darkly comic and devastating mirror of our age.<sup>6</sup> Look into it, and see how far we've come — and gone astray."<sup>7</sup>

back page bump  
*The Boomer Bible*

## BOOK

**The Boomer Bible**  
by R. F. Laird  
published by Thomas Allen & Son Limited  
768 pages

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pretentious twaddle. It hasn't been more than three years since Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, which attempted the same overview of a generation as *The Boomer Bible*. There are a lot of great writers trying to put character's lives into the context of the society in which they live.

There are too many books and too few hours in a day in which to read them. Often, we pick up a promising book in a store and read the back cover or jacket to get an idea of what it's like. But beware! The blurbs are virtually never written by the author, and are aimed at getting you to buy the book.

<sup>2</sup> I did laugh. Frequently, in fact. Laird has a totally skewed way of making what we know to be true hilariously fresh. His parodies are often breathtaking, and his satire is pointed and dead on.

As for the rest of the blurb, I can only agree with "makes you think." Reading *The Boomer Bible* is an interactive experience for the lively mind; if you're prepared to be open to what a writer is saying, you will be

rewarded with insight. Laird has created a complex work by taking a lot of the strands of sixties culture and tracing how they interacted to create the Boomer philosophy of the eighties.

As for "makes you question, makes you cringe...and shout yes! in agreement," I suspect there is some confusion as to who is likely to read *The Boomer Bible*. My guess would be people who already question Boomer culture, people who aren't likely to cringe at what Laird is saying because they already know something is wrong (the post-Boomers, for one). If the intention is to make Boomers reconsider their lives, I think the publishers are in for a rude shock: being a Boomer means never having to say you're selfish.

<sup>3</sup> *The Boomer Bible* achieves this lack of "heresy or sacrilege" because, although it is structured like the Bible, it generally isn't about religion. This line, which panders to people's religious sensitivities, seems inconsistent with the line about making you question, cringe and think, but nobody

said back page bump writers had to be consistent.

The parody is clever, and works more often in the book's 768 pages than one might expect. However, this causes some structural problems which makes it next to impossible to read from cover to cover.

For one thing, there is no narrative. The Past Testament gives a history of the world, a few odds and ends and humorous glosses on some of the greatest minds on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the sort of glosses which have appeared in *A Beginner's Guide to Capitalism*, *A Beginner's Guide to Communism* and some of Don Harron's Charlie Farquharson books. In small doses, you can admire the wit; but, after 300 or 400 pages, your eyes begin to blur.

Also, in keeping with the books origins, there is a lot of repetition. Although Laird valiantly tries to develop different perspectives in the gospels and different creative ideas in the rest, he is ultimately defeated by his chosen structure. *The Boomer Bible* is a dipping book. This is unfortunate, because Laird does manage to tie all his ideas together brilliantly.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, it isn't obligatory that you agree with all his points of view.

I have a hard time accepting his ideas on Blame, part of saviour Harry's holy trinity, as the sole motive for progressives (ie — feminists, gays and lesbians, Blacks, et al). Although some progressive groups certainly tend to blame others for their problems, it is also true that there is real group oppression in the world. Laird's answer to such problems (as individuals we must all work to create a better society if we want one) seems naive and simplistic.

<sup>5</sup> Exalted company, indeed. It is true that Laird has attempted to use his satire to lay bare the pretensions of his society in much the same way as the great writers to whom he is compared.

However, Laird does not exhibit the frankness or anger which would put him in the same league as Lenny Bruce, or the often subtle style which marked both Twain and Swift. Ultimately, it should be left to history, not a publicist, to determine whether or not he belongs in such exalted company.

<sup>6</sup> I couldn't have put it better myself.  
<sup>7</sup> With my apologies to Vladimir Nabokov, a true renegade of literary structures, who used this annotative format in his masterpiece *Pale Fire*.

