

Reimagining ‘The Brothers Karamazov’? Lan Samantha Chang likes a challenge.

The author of ‘The Family Chao’ discusses her homage to Dostoevsky

By Meredith Maran

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There are as many wacky ideas for novels as there are novelists. More, actually; many novelists move closer to the outer edges of imagination (theirs; ours) with each book. As proof, I submit “The Family Chao,” the third novel by Lan Samantha Chang, in which she reimagines Fyodor Dostoevsky’s epic “The Brothers Karamazov” as a contemporary Chinese American family drama.

Say *what*?

“Couldn’t you have given yourself a more ambitious challenge?” I asked Chang during a lively transatlantic conversation, and we both laughed. Truth be told, I wasn’t surprised by the length or the success of her reach. If you’ve read Chang — and I strongly suggest you do — you know that she lives and writes to push the boundaries of her craft and her world.

Raised by Chinese immigrant parents in Appleton, Wis., Chang received her BA from Yale, her MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and was awarded creative writing fellowships by Stanford, Princeton, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2005, Chang returned to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, this time as its director, becoming the first woman, and the first Asian American, to hold that job.

While publishing short stories in prestigious literary outlets, including two issues of “Best American Short Stories,” Chang wrote “Hunger: A Novella and Stories” (1998) and the novels “Inheritance” (2004) and “All Is Forgotten, Nothing Is Lost” (2010).

Her new novel is a genre bender: a murder story whose prose sings and snickers and soars as engagingly as Chang’s literary fiction. The victim is Leo Chao, owner of the Fine Chao Chinese Restaurant in Haven, Wis., and tyrannical father of adult sons Dagou, Ming and James.

“No one could have believed that such good food was cooked by a bad person,” Chang writes in the novel’s prologue.

Here, Chang dives deep into the hot topics that inspired and shaped “The Family Chao”: fiction writing in the era of racial and gender reckoning, literary trends and the joys and travails of writing a book that is an homage — to one’s own people, and to a literary giant who lived 142 years earlier and 5,000 miles away.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: *Secular Jew here. I’ve eaten in restaurants like Fine Chao all my life, knowing nothing about the people who fry my pot stickers. As a Chinese American writer, do you feel a responsibility to educate your non-Chinese readers about your experience, especially in this wannabe-woke era?*

A: I don’t want to speak on behalf of Chinese Americans. I want to speak about what it felt like to grow up in the first Chinese immigrant family, my family, in Appleton, Wis., in the mid-1960s.

Much of the attention paid to my first book, “Hunger,” related to the way the characters fit the acceptable stereotype of the quietly suffering Chinese American family. But I actually grew up in a noisy Chinese American family. There were too many of us, and not enough space. We were always short on money, we ate a lot and laughed and yelled a lot. In my early work, I was unable to portray this. I was so inexperienced, I didn’t understand that I was trying to write according to a set of rules that were standard at the time, rules that required the use of as few words as possible. People accepted my portrayal of quiet Chinese families with their repressed suffering because this fit with the way immigrant families were expected to be. In 2021, I could write my characters in a more candid way.

Q: *What changed?*

A: Society. People are working really hard, as writers and as humans, to change the kinds of stories we get to tell and how we tell them. Writing “The Family Chao” I felt an incredible urge to create characters who were true to the vivid lives of people I knew. I wanted to portray a Chinese man as strong

family Chao, I felt an incredible urge to create characters who were true to the vivid lives of people I know. I wanted to portray a Chinese man as strong and lively as my late father, a larger-than-life character. My father was a much more moral person than Leo Chao. But some things about Leo Chao are taken straight from home.

Q: *Where'd you get the somewhat wacky idea to model "The Family Chao" on "The Brothers Karamazov"?*

A: Fifteen years ago, in my first semester at the Writers' Workshop, I started teaching a noncredit discussion group in which a bunch of us read "The Brothers Karamazov," then got together and talked about it for six to eight hours. It was such a pleasure.

Years later I was trying to come up with something to work on. I was overwhelmed with running the workshop and having a child. Then, while I was in a residency at Yaddo [a retreat for artists in Upstate New York], I reread the bits and scraps I'd been jotting down, and I started writing a novel from close third person in present tense, from the different points of view in a family.

That's when I realized that the voice in the novel I was working on matched, in some ways, the unfolding quality of "The Brothers Karamazov." It wasn't the plot that interested me most. It was the sense of time unfolding as characters are moving through it. This gives the reader space to assume things and to not know what's going to happen.

Q: *Now tell us how you did it: I mean, no pressure. It's just Dostoevsky.*

A: When you love a book enough to write an homage to it, you can get overwhelmed. "The Brothers Karamazov" is so great, it would have snuffed out my effort if I'd looked at it while I was writing. I consulted the five-volume Dostoevsky bio by Joseph Frank instead.

I remember the moment "The Family Chao" stopped being an homage, a dialogue with Dostoevsky, and started being its own book. Suddenly I was making work that was coherently itself. In that moment it became irrelevant how well I recapitulated Dostoevsky, as long as I kept his element of surprise. When you hurtle yourself into a work of his, there's something so surprising about it. For me, using the present tense to create unfolding action was part of that. Allowing characters to have long monologues was part of that. Allowing characters to ... swear and masturbate and ejaculate was part of that.

Q: *The book's velocity and dramatic tension are palpable, and not just because it's a mystery.*

A: In the past I've been a quiet writer. Some of my work felt flat to me. This time I wanted to escalate the conflict, using the kinds of impulses that make people shout at each other. My characters behave absurdly. They feel self-pity. Their emotional palettes are much more far-ranging than in my early work.

Even the food we ate growing up was interesting, and I put that into "The Family Chao." When our parents arrived in the U.S., Americans were eating peanut butter and jelly, and cake from a box and Cool Whip. My parents couldn't buy the ingredients they needed to make Chinese food, and so they improvised. They made stir-fry out of iceberg lettuce. After the Vietnam War, supermarkets became more diverse. My parents couldn't believe their good fortune! We ate bean sprouts for weeks.

Q: *What's next for fans of Sam Chang?*

A: I've got 200 pages of a new thing. I'm at that phase where I read it and realize it's horrible. I'm going to give it a little distance, and then I'm going to go back to my thing that was good and now is terrible and try to make it good again. What else is there to do?

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Meredith Maran is a journalist, critic and the author of “The New Old Me: My Late-Life Reinvention,” among other books.

The Family Chao

By Lan Samantha Chang

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