

1. Please excuse me if I am presumptuous. I would like to ask, because the book provides readers with many entry points, would you say that *The End of the River* is an autobiographical novel? Following the childhood theme of *The Snow Falls in Clouds: Recollections of A Borneo Childhood*, the enlightened youth of *The End of the River*, what is next in the *Borneo Trilogy*?

Li: *The End of the River* does have an autobiographical feel and is essentially a memoir written as a novel. However, because it is a fictional novel, readers should not read it with an autography mindset. It is impossible to distinguish the real experiences from the imaginary in the novel. They have become a single organic being, unable to be separated, because it is fiction.

Memory is a strange thing; things can be added into memory that then become amalgamated and inseparable.

The *Borneo Trilogy* started with the character of Zhu Ling, giving the story its life. Naturally, the third part of the trilogy will also start with her. Because the novels are Zhu Ling's stories, the trilogy started with her and should end with her. After the trilogy, Zhu Ling will disappear, never to be seen again.

2. The entirety of *The End of the River* has a very clear core story line, from the start of the journey until the night of full moon, step by step pushing toward the climax. However, what's more bewildering to the reader is the abundance of details. Whether it is the image of a rainforest or an upstream river, the descriptions are so vivid and astonishing. May I ask if these details come from your memory and imagination or do you also rely on outside references?

Li: Since my mother passed away more than twenty years ago, I have not returned [to Borneo]. While writing this book, I used my childhood impressions of Borneo. I lived in Borneo for twenty years, until the age of nineteen, before coming to Taiwan. Borneo's tall mountains and wide rivers come from my childhood world, and have naturally incorporated themselves into my writings of Borneo. A Chinese poet once wrote a poem, saying that the world he saw as a child was so big, but when he grew older and returned, that world became small, which is a saddening thought. When you're young, your world is enlarged; the Borneo landscape from my childhood was enormous, and it seems like if I returned, that landscape would unexpectedly become smaller. Therefore, I don't wish to return. I would like to preserve my childhood memories; this way, my hometown will not diminish but will rather become bigger. If I returned to Borneo in order to write this novel, Borneo would become smaller and I would not be able to write the novel with such power and force. The most shocking part of *The End of the River* is how magnificent and enormous Borneo is. Memories are a kind of brewing, a sort of fermentation. I feel very lucky that I have not returned to Borneo since childhood, and that my world has not shrunk.

3. You once said that you want to confide to the character young Zhu Ling in the book, and you want to say “the dirtiest things to the purest and the most innocent people.” Besides being the ideal listener, does Zhu Ling also represent your ideal reader? In this book, you mention Zhu Ling, Taiwan, and Borneo; three favorite concepts and imagery have come together. Other than the two Taiwanese moons’ attraction, there is also the “author’s own” writing about a homeland in a foreign land. From a different perspective, is this book also a representative of self-analysis and portrayal to the “Taiwanese readers?”

Li: Yes, Zhu Ling’s role is not only the ideal listener, but also from the author’s viewpoint the ideal reader. However, most importantly, she is a muse! I have been reading Western literature since I was young. Western literature has a special characteristic – there is always a muse. Whether it is a poet or a classical novelist, when creating a piece of work, they will always look to the muse, asking for inspiration... This muse is often a beautiful woman; it can be a goddess from Greek mythology or a real person. The muse magically leads everyone into heaven or hell. I really like this idea. Therefore, in my own work I created a muse in Chinese literature – Zhu Ling. From my impression, Chinese literature has not created this type of muse. Muses can make literature even more beautiful, more emotional. This is a good tradition in Western literature; is there anything wrong with borrowing it for our own literature?

4. In fact, this journey is not only Yong’s journey of enlightenment but also Kristina’s healing journey. Over the course of the journey, Kristina not only brings and guides Yong to the holy mountain, but Yong also uses his selfless love to heal Kristina’s scarred and damaged heart and body. Why did you plan it this way? Does this have political meaning?

Li: Kristina is based on a real person. However, Kristina in the novel is not the same Kristina that I met in my childhood; they are very, very different. This is a good thing; it shows that she is a successful character and has her own life. She was reborn from a childhood character and became a living character in the novel. This was a very successful transformation.

Regarding “political meaning,” this novel absolutely surpasses politics, although the invasion of post-colonialism and Western imperialism to the Third World, etc., presents in the book. Good novels always surpass politics. There are political meanings but I hope that readers do not focus on this aspect. This novel absolutely surpasses politics. I hope that readers look beyond the politics and find the higher meaning of the novel, for example the things about human nature. Xu Wenwei once said that *The End of the River* is the most terrifying novel that he has ever read. Why is it so terrifying? The horror comes from the people, and human nature can be terrifying. This is why in the novel I repeatedly mention the novel *Heart of Darkness*. When facing death in an African forest, the protagonist’s last words were: “The horror! The Horror.” He was talking about the horror of human mind.

5. Before reaching the holy mountain, Yong followed a spirit of a Kenya young woman to a mysterious land, The Kingdom of Children, and almost died there. However, David Der-wei Wang in his preface to your book states that this paradise-like kingdom is “the core of Li Yongping’s lyrical imagination in the entire book.” What do you think about his commentary here? On one hand, the young Yong loves Kristina dearly, but on the other hand he cannot part from the young bride in The Kingdom of Children. Are you really setting a stage for your next novel with this arrangement?

Li: The Kingdom of Children certainly can be a literary world on its own. My next novel should derive from The Kingdom of Children. I think that you can say that “on one hand, the young Yong loves Kristina dearly, but on the other hand he cannot part from the young bride in The Kingdom of Children. This arrangement is really for setting a stage for my next novel.”

6. Your students say that you are very good at telling a story, but a novel is not just a story. You have a very strong background in literary theory, but you never give up “telling stories.” You even lament that the young Taiwanese writers have lost their ability to tell stories. For you, what is the definition of novel besides being a “story?”

Li: The original function of a novel is “telling stories.” If there is no story, this literary form, novel, will not exist. I believe that a novelist’s job is to tell stories. If we want to keep this literary form, novel, we need stories.

As for the question of what is the definition of novel besides being a story, I would say that this is a very complicated question that relates to literature, and it involves many issues; one can write a long essay on this topic. Of course, as a literary form, the novel certainly surpasses stories, and it covers many things, and definitely has a deeper and higher meaning than stories. This question is hard to answer clearly here.

A novel is certainly not just a story, and story is only the basics. If one wants to keep the title “novel,” one still needs to tell a story! Even if it does not have a clear storyline, the details should have stories.

However, if one wants to abandon the concept of “telling stories,” one might be creating a new literary form. A new creative writing form is also a good thing. I think that it is good to break the literary tradition and create a new form of the novel. I hope that the young writers can create a new form for the novel.