

The First Two Pages: “Chin Yong-Yun Goes to Church” by S.J. Rozan
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An Essay by S.J. Rozan

The reason I agreed to do a story for this book—besides I love Jeffrey Marks, publisher at Crippen & Landru—was so I could break Rule Number 5, “No Chinaman must figure in the story.” In his explication Father Knox goes on to say, “Why this should be so I do not know, unless we can find a reason for it in our western habit of assuming that the Celestial is over-equipped in the matter of brains, and under-equipped in the matter of morals. I only offer it as a fact of observation that, if you are turning over the pages of a book and come across some mention of ‘the slit-like eyes of Chin Loo,’ you had best put it down at once; it is bad.”

I fully agree with Knox on Chin Loo’s slit-like eyes; a writer who writes a description like that has probably written a bad book. However, Knox’s assumption here is that every mention of a Chinese person in a crime story involves caricature and bad writing. That might have been largely (though not completely) true in his day, but to therefore make a rule blaming and banning the caricatured instead of the caricaturist is illogical to the point of absurdity.

So instead of none, I decided to go all-out Chinese. And that meant either Lydia Chin or her mother, Chin Yong-Yun.

The deciding factor: I was writing a Bill Smith book at the time, and I get confused if I switch voices between Bill and Lydia when I'm in the middle of a book, even to do a short story.

So Ma Chin it was.

The choice of Ma Chin as narrator brought its own rules. I don't get her involved in murder. Ma Chin's not exactly a comic character, and she's very smart, but the light spirit of her stories would be overwhelmed by violent death. She solves what are sometimes crimes, as in this case, but also almost always family problems or, at least, interpersonal ones. A number of her stories are stings; her personality lends itself to that.

I also wanted to involve Father Knox. He wrote crime stories, and he wrote rules for them; why should he not also appear in one? One in which a Chinese woman not only figures, but gets the better of him? Ah, the deliciousness.

So, where to start? On to the opening sentence.

In a short story there's no time for a long wind-up. The great short story writer Brendan Dubois once likened a short story to a liquor store holdup: you get in and get out. (As opposed to a novel, which in my mind is the long con, where everything has to be in place before you yank on the rug.) So: Open with Father

Knox, and a demand to be shown the money. Father Knox because everyone reading this story will know he's the reason for the book and, I hope, be intrigued to find him actually in it; and the money, because demanding to be shown the money is a very un-Chin-Yong-Yun-like thing to do. Also, "show me the money" is generally understood to mean one thing, so I decided to make it mean another.

And then, before Father Knox has a chance to respond, Ma Chin sets the scene for us. She flashes back to the day before, where a young woman Lydia's age says that her mother's a fool. The case is laid out. Chin Yong-Yun, in her usual way, decides how to handle things even before the client has finished speaking. Also, in her usual way, she tells neither the client nor the reader what she intends.

But it's all fair play. Father Knox's other rules are piously followed. It's just, in this story, they're followed by Chinese people (and one white guy), for the benefit of Chinese people. And poor Father Knox is left scratching his head.

The First Two Pages of "Chin Yong-Yun Goes to Church"

"Father Knox," I said, "show me the money."

This is not a request I have often made of a member of the clergy. I'm not actually a person who has many dealings with members of the clergy. When I do it's on ritual occasions, when I am by tradition required to open my purse to give money to them. I don't light candles or say prayers, except at the home altar where I make offerings — oranges, sweets, tea — to my ancestors. I offer incense in the Buddhist temple, also, on festival days. In fact I was surprised, when I stepped inside Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow Church, to find them using incense here, too.

I had not previously been inside this small Catholic Church on the eastern edge of Chinatown. Most of my Catholic friends in Chinatown attend the Church of the Transfiguration, a large stone building that looms over Mott Street. Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow is a much smaller, older church. Its congregation has shrunk — children have moved away, parents who were young when they first brought their families here have grown old. Now only elders from the surrounding blocks, people who don't want to walk the distance to Transfiguration Church, make up the congregation of Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow. I have heard rumors the church may close. (I don't know how these churches get their names but it has occurred to me that they might attract additional worshippers if they were called something more cheerful.)

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My visit to Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow had started yesterday, when young Ellen Quan flopped into the easy chair in my living room. Not, of course, the chair that had been my husband's. That chair is reserved for special guests.

Ellen Quan was not a guest. She was a client.

She wore frayed blue jeans, a too-big yellow T-shirt stained in places with ink, mismatched socks. Her worn sneakers were in my tiny vestibule, as we do not wear shoes in my home. She said, "Oh, Auntie Chin, my mother is such a fool!"

To be polite, Ellen was speaking to me in Chinese. Being polite in return, I was addressing her by her American name, though she had a perfectly good Chinese one, Ai-Lun, which means "loved by all people." I didn't know what Ellen meant but it couldn't be as auspicious. Still, people of her generation prefer to use their American names. I'm a person who likes to be courteous whenever I can.

Right now, however, Ellen needed scolding. "Really, you must not speak of your mother like that." Though I couldn't let such unfilial behavior go by without comment, Ellen was in fact correct. I had known Quan Yan since before her children were born. Ellen had said "fool" but if we'd been speaking English the word she would have used might have been "ditz." I learned this word from my daughter, who is a private investigator. Once, people who came here needing a problem solved only asked for my daughter. Now, however, as I have solved a few cases myself, I find there are people who come to speak privately to me. Ellen Quan had gone to elementary school with my

daughter. Perhaps she was embarrassed to ask a contemporary for help, but willing to ask an elder. That, obviously, is as it should be.

Being well brought up — even a ditz, apparently, can teach her children good manners — Ellen had presented me with a bag of tangerines. I set them out in a bowl. Pouring her a cup of tea, I said, “You must tell me what happened.” I added, “Tell me all of it. Don’t hold anything back.” I said that because my daughter says it, though I don’t know why someone, wanting me to solve their problem, would not tell me what it is.

“My mother has invested in the restoration of some art works in the church.”

“I see,” I said, though I did not see at all. I said another thing I’ve heard my daughter say. “Can you please go into more detail?”

Ellen sipped her tea. “Oh, Auntie, this is very good.” I don’t know if she really thought that but it was the polite thing to say. “There’s a new priest at the church. My mother goes to Perpetual Sorrow, you know, not Transfiguration. My father was very involved there his whole life. He was an usher, the Men’s Club treasurer, he taught Sunday school back when the congregation was big enough to have a Sunday school. Going there makes my mother feel close to him.”

“I’m glad she gets such comfort,” I said. “Though I’ve heard that church will close.”

“It was supposed to. But this new priest seems to have convinced the diocese he could bring more parishioners in.”

“The Diocese is his superior?”

“It’s an organization. It manages the churches in a geographical area. They’re giving him a chance to grow the church. That would revive it.”

“Very well.”

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SJ Rozan’s twenty novels and eighty-plus short stories have won multiple awards, including the Edgar, Shamus, Anthony, Nero, Macavity, and the Japanese Maltese Falcon. She’s been honored with Life Achievement Awards from both the Private Eye Writers of America and the Short Mystery Fiction Society. Many of her stories have appeared in various “Best Of” collections, and she’s edited three anthologies. www.sjrozan.net