

Fortune's Daughter

A lifelong obsession with fortune cookies leads author Jennifer 8. Lee on a quest to discover much more than just a favorite childhood dessert.

STORY Elisa Mala



JENNIFER 8. LEE PHOTO BY NINA SUBIN.

Less than five minutes after I enter the Harlem duplex of Jennifer 8. Lee, the well-known *New York Times* journalist and author offers me a bite to eat. “An expensive cookie from an expensive restaurant,” is how the gregarious 32-year-old introduces a ginger snap that has been left over from a jaunt to the glitzy Swedish-inspired eatery, Aquavit. Any more high-falutin’ and the snack would be downright pretentious, but the fancy biscuit encased within the fancy box proves to be worth every penny.

It’s no surprise that it’s tasty. Even if Scandinavian delights aren’t Lee’s main area of expertise, the ginger snaps are

still apropos, considering that their Asian cousins have been on her mind for a good part of her life. As something of a cookie aficionado, Lee sampled hundreds while researching her book, *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* (Twelve; March 2008). By way of an investigative-journalistic approach, it delves deeply into the origins of the curvaceous, crescent-shaped wafers and documents the quest to find the greatest Chinese restaurant outside of China.

The Fortune Cookie Chronicles went from conception to completion in three years, but the seeds of influence were planted more than three decades ago.

Long before she traipsed through 42 states and more than 20 countries in search of the cookie’s past, she was a curious toddler who explored the nooks and crannies of her family’s Morningside Heights apartment in New York. Even then, she had a way with words. She penciled musings on the wall, and when her parents placed her in her high chair to keep her out of trouble, she cried out to be released because she said the chair would break. Her exploits reached a high point when her mother, Angela “Yachiao” Lee, tied the drawers with string to keep them closed. “I needed to lock the kitchen,” says Mrs. Lee.

Excommunication from the family kitchen did little to stifle her interest in viands. As a 12-year-old, Lee had read the work of another American-born Chinese author, Amy Tan. It was within the pages of the *The Joy Luck Club* that Lee first discovered that her long-loved dessert, the fortune cookie, had a secret and mysterious past. Its origin was not Chinese, as she had assumed. “It was like learning that there was no such thing as Santa Claus and that I was adopted at the same time,” she says. The thunderstruck middle-schooler found her curiosity piqued. A love affair was born.

Like the object of her lifelong obsession, the author herself is not without a fascinating story. There is a sense that her life is a bottomless treasure trove of extraordinary experiences, that it’s impossible to know all that is Jennifer 8. Lee. She collects toothpaste from around the world — the most unusual flavor is green tea and honey from Thailand. I tell her that when I visited my 7-year-old cousin, Mai, at her Bangkok home, I spotted a tube marked “coca-cola” sitting along the sink. Upon hearing this, her jaw drops. “Why didn’t you bring it back?!” is the good-humored admonition.

Beyond her curious penchant for exotic toothpastes, there’s the more obvi-

ous part of Lee — her name. How many Jennifers are there in the world? How many Lees? But sandwiched between these two common monikers is a most uncommon stamp that has become part of her mystique. Spelled out as “Eight” on her driver’s license and written as “8.” in her byline, complete with a period, the Chinese symbol for good luck is the author’s actual middle name — she added it herself during her teen years. “On the birth certificate, there is no ‘eight,’” explains her mother.

But even if her nom de plume were bereft of that lucky number, chances are that Lee would be no less memorable. “Effervescent” is how Alexis Ohanian, designer of the book’s blog and co-founder of a news sharing site, describes her. Occasional appearances in gossip columns and multiple mentions on meta-media website Gawker.com paint her as a social butterfly with the uncanny ability to charm anyone who crosses her path. This assertion is more true than not. She constantly invites people into her home, even if they are near-strangers, and even though it’s New York City, where it’s possible to befriend someone for years without ever stepping foot into his or her residence.

“Jenny has the most interesting group of friends of anyone I know,” says Nolan Myers. Counting himself among them, he arrived at *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* book party wearing an “I love Jenny 8. Lee” T-shirt. Hosted by her friend Eric T. Lee, the fête’s attendees included her family, *Good* magazine publisher and co-founder Max Schorr, friends

“It was like learning that there was no such thing as Santa Claus and that I was adopted at the same time.”

— Jennifer 8. Lee, on discovering that fortune cookies are not of Chinese origin



who flew in from across the globe, and the requisite bevy of media members — one young *Times* reporter even brought his parents. Her legendary parties and impressive guest-lists have garnered their own media coverage. *Esquire* is even a fan — she was the only reporter to grace the 2003 edition of the magazine’s “Women We Love” list.

But Paris Hilton she is not. These parties are not the kind that would have Lee stumbling out onto the sidewalk at 2 a.m. A low tolerance for alcohol means that she never touches a drop. Compared to such celebrity antics, Lee is decidedly more bookish, despite her inability to read when she took an entrance exam for elementary school at the age of 4 and a half, says her mother. But thanks to top grades at Hunter College High School, a prestigious public institution with its own entrance exam, and stratospheric SAT scores, she attended Harvard. After interning for *Newsday*, *The Boston Globe* and several other top publications, the applied mathematics and economics major became a staff writer at *The New York Times* at the tender age of 24. Currently stationed at the paper’s City Room blog, she has covered crime (a beat she calls “murder and mayhem”), technology and culture, writing about nearly every topic under the sun. Her irrepressible curiosity, knack for research and colorful cast of characters have served her well, yielding quirky stories that few others could write.

Among her best-known works is a 2005 story about “man dates,” a term she coined to describe the phenomenon of “two guys meeting for the kind of outing a straight man might reasonably arrange with a woman.” This season, the catchphrase even found its way to an episode of Fox’s *House*.

A month after the “man date” story came one about Powerball. When a seemingly regular lottery drawing produced an anomalously large number of winners, authorities suspected fraud. Turns out, the winners had all copied numbers from the tiny strips of paper

enveloped in the faux-Chinese desserts. The culprits of this caper were fortune cookies, which were indeed quite fortunate. They were auspicious for Lee as well; she turned the article into a prologue and theme for her book.

As she consumed these cookies throughout the years, the cookies consumed her. If they were not Chinese, as Amy Tan had shockingly revealed, what was their provenance? Were they Chinese? American? Neither? Both? The final answer was none of the above.

Along the way, the gustatory sleuth follows a real-life police case surrounding a missing Chinese deliveryman, reveals how trapezoidal white boxes emerged as cultural icons, traces the roots of General Tso, and unearths the greatest Chinese restaurant in the world outside of China. Hint: There are more Chinese eateries in America than McDonald’s, Burger King and KFC locations combined, but the best Chinese restaurant is not located in this country. Perhaps that’s because dishes like orange chicken and chow mein would be mostly unrecognized in their supposed country of origin.

“Identity and authenticity are more malleable than you think,” says Lee’s friend, the Sri Lankan novelist of *Love Marriage*, V. V. Ganeshanathan. Says Lee, “The book is really supposed to make you think about what it is to be American.”

Not that the author or her two siblings are likely to forget any time soon: The first initials of Jennifer, Frances and Kenneth are the same as JFK airport, which is how their parents first arrived in America to begin an arduous path involving countless struggles. As much as Lee appreciated these sacrifices in the past — the girl who struggled to learn how to read made sure that her sister and brother knew the alphabet at the age of 2 — her gratitude has increased infinitely. Which is perhaps why the dedication to her book reads: “For Mom and Dad, who left their homeland so their children could follow their passions, and for all the other moms and dads who have done the same.” ❀