

Us 'n them

Fruit 'n Food
by Leonard Chang
Black Heron Press
1996



Review by Karen Lyu (Summer 1998 issue)

Through believable characters and detached third-person reporting, Leonard Chang's *Fruit 'n Food* takes an unflinching look at racial and generational conflicts. Tom Pak is starkly portrayed as a solitary, directionless 26-year old college drop-out who moves back to his childhood area in Queens, New York and discovers that it has become dominated by racial fears and economic despair.

Tom ends up as a store clerk at Mr. and Mrs. Rhee's *Fruit 'n Food* (even though Mr. Rhee ridicules Tom for not knowing Korean) where these tensions are played out.

Mr. and Mrs. Rhee are depicted as hard-working Korean immigrants trying to make enough money to get by and put their daughter Jung-Me/June in college. They become Tom's surrogate parents, teaching the very Americanized Tom about Korean culture and food (his mom died while Tom was young and his distant father died while Tom was in high school). June/Jung-Me (Chang uses both) is a self-absorbed 16-year old who doesn't understand her parent's desperate life of hard work and sacrifice, and gets involved with Tom.

The Rhees and their customers are colored by grays. There are preconceptions of greedy, racist Koreans going into black neighborhoods and taking their money, and also of African-Americans being dangerous criminals and druggies who resent Koreans. This is offset by the Rhee's friendship with Mr. Harris, an elderly black man whose wife died of a heart-attack when her purse was stolen by "gang-peh" (Korean gangsters). Mr. Rhee also tells his wife, "Don't say 'gumdngge'." (Racial epithet for an African American).

Tom feels alienated from the Koreans and the African-Americans, yet considers himself to be tolerant of both. After a series of escalating incidents peaking with the sixth armed robbery of the grocery store by a young black man, this attitude becomes difficult as Mrs. Rhee's racism intensifies and Tom becomes terrified that every customer may be a criminal, worrying that he missed spotting a shoplifter. It is during this fear-driven, sleep-deprived stupor that Tom reacts unintentionally and sets off a time-bomb of pent-up racism.

Chang makes the reader aware of how the media accounts of the events that follow heighten the tension through self-fulfilled prophecies of the violence "heating up". He also involves the reader from the first page: "We begin this story at the end, to show you what will come." *Fruit 'n Food* is a well-written, ambitious first novel. Unfortunately,

in my opinion, Chang's nonjudgemental record of events leaves the reader disturbed without any options of hope or positive action. There is enough hopelessness in the world. Readers need to know there are people and organizations out there bringing about change with such programs as those that support interracial hiring in segregated areas and interracial groups that work to rebuild communities. But then, that would be a different book.