



Aloft

Chang-rae Lee

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The New York Times—bestselling novel by the critically acclaimed author of *Native Speaker* and *A Gesture Life*.

At 59, Jerry Battle is coasting through life. His favorite pastime is flying his small plane high above Long Island. Aloft, he can escape from the troubles that plague his family, neighbors, and loved ones on the ground. But he can't stay in the air forever. Only months before his 60th birthday, a culmination of family crises finally pull Jerry down from his emotionally distant course.

Jerry learns that his family's stability is in jeopardy. His father, Hank, is growing increasingly unhappy in his assisted living facility. His son, Jack, has taken over the family landscaping business but is running it into bankruptcy. His daughter, Theresa, has become pregnant and has been diagnosed with cancer. His longtime girlfriend, Rita, who helped raise his children, has now moved in with another man. And Jerry still has unanswered questions that he must face regarding the circumstances surrounding the death of his late wife.

Since the day his wife died, Jerry has turned avoiding conflict into an art form—the perfect expression being his solitary flights from which he can look down on a world that appears serene and unscathed. From his comfortable distance, he can't see the messy details, let alone begin to confront them. But Jerry is learning that in avoiding conflict, he is also avoiding contact with the people he loves most.

Aloft Details

Date : Published 2005 (first published 2004)

ISBN : 9780747572480

Author : Chang-rae Lee

Format : Paperback 352 pages

Genre : Fiction, Contemporary, Literary Fiction

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Nick says

This was sitting on my shelf for a long time so I figured I should give it a whirl.

I have mixed feelings about this book. I think Lee didn't get the protagonist's voice at all. The honeyed language he uses seems completely wrong for an Italian building contractor. Lee tries to rectify this by using slang like "my chubby" every once in while but he doesn't pull it off (at all). Having heard Lee read a portion of the book in 2002 (that's why I got the book to begin with, funny how taste's change), I feel as if Lee, as a person, is very far from this character and, at some level, was doomed to fail in trying to reproduce the character's dialogue and feelings accurately.

At the same time, it's actually really nice to have this protagonist exist at all. I get the feeling that if this protagonist were a writer, he would most likely write Tom Clancy-style fiction, less emotionally-sensitive prose. So perhaps I should be happy that Lee brought the story out to begin with, despite its flaws.

The story itself cobbles together a number of upper middle class white America clichés but I was surprisingly moved by the ending--what the book is trying to say is, dare I say it, Important. I just wish I found the story a little more believable on my way there.

Yulia says

I'll always read what Lee writes, but I'm baffled by the critical praise this book received. His narrator is a retired landscaper who's Italian-American, but I just never bought that Lee was comfortable in this skin. He alternates between overwriting aggressively long sentences and using slang and tough-guy talk that just never seems plausible, as if the narrator has to remind himself of his role but continues to fall out of character. Some sentences were so tangled by their ambition, I'd find myself unable to get past them; they were so intractable. It's not that I couldn't believe a landscaper could philosophize for pages about human potential, but that the man seemed to be torn between two voices that never quite met. Regardless of his narrator's background, Lee can get caught up in his love for particular words like "angle" (v.) and "accrue" and I couldn't help wondering if there was a 12-step program for getting over such a specific idiolect addiction (ah, an editor). Thankfully, he manages to make everything come together in that last tenth of the book and we understand what he's been building up to, like a puzzle that suddenly reveals itself (or perhaps that's my convincing myself it was worth the struggle), but it ultimately can't fully erase my memory of all the awkward passages that preceded it. (2.5 stars)

Lauren Albert says

I thought this was a beautiful look at a man's struggle to connect with his family.

Stephen says

I just finished reading this book tonight. I've been putting it off until I realized he was publishing a new novel in 2008. I didn't want to fall behind. I don't know what to make of the book. It revolves around an Italian American protagonist who basically is having to come to terms with the fact that he needs to more firmly ensconce himself in the lives of his family and friends.

Spoilers below with cast listing

Cast of characters:

Jerry Battle: protagonist, distant, mid-life crisis, enjoys flying airplanes, works for a Travel Company

Rita: former nanny, Puerto Rican American, now ex-wife, raised Jerry's kids

Daisy Han: Jerry's first wife, Korean American, once manic-depressive, drowns in family pool

Theresa Battle: Jerry's daughter, college professor, pregnant, suffering from Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma

Paul Pyun: Theresa's husband and fictitious foil of author, Chang-rae Lee

Jack Battle: Jerry's son, whitewashed, married to Eunice with two kids who watch Britney Spears, mismanaging the "family" business

Chris says

This is a family drama---which usually means a "chick lit" type of book. However, make no mistake: this is a guy's book. Even more specifically, it is a middle aged guy's book. I doubt that I would have found much to interest me if I read this at 20, but at 50 it resonated as closely as stories told at a family reunion and at times I felt like an uncle grabbed me and said "Don't laugh, have you thought we could be talking about you?"

Jerry Battle would be unlikable if he weren't so honest. That is probably also why this book works. As self centered as they come, he is also a keen observer of human nature---particularly his own. Jerry has to constantly remind himself of how he **SHOULD** feel or act at a certain time and take himself to task for falling short. Using the imagery of flight we take a seat next to Jerry as he, in his annoyingly detached way, describes the events of his life and those of his family. Always from a safe emotional distance in the clouds. From above one can survey the devastated terrain and accurately assess the damage, but does not get one's feet dirty.

That is until both metaphorically and physically he is taken on a white knuckled ride out of those clouds and onto the ground. And into the real. Where his presence makes the pain unavoidable and where he can finally take his place among the people in his life.

Brilliant book. At times hilarious and heart-breaking. I read slowly and found myself stopping and re-reading countless times to enjoy the beauty of a phrase or to ponder the truth of what Lee is telling us.

Becca says

I bought *Aloft* for two reasons: first of all, it was on the bargain book table at Booksmith. But, more importantly, it is by Chang-Rae Lee. A few years ago, I read another book of his for my contemporary novel

class, Native Speaker. For me, Native Speaker was one of those books that seemed like it was written just for me. It's easily one of my favorite books of all time. I didn't enjoy Aloft as much, but like Native Speaker, it tackles the themes of race and family and how those both factor in to identity. Also like Native Speaker, it is very well-written.

I think the reason that I like Lee's books so much is that they are about life situations that are entirely different from my own and yet are completely relatable. Native Speaker, in particular, focuses on race and assimilation, but it is framed in such a way that it's not just about how being Korean American affects the main character, but how we are all shaped by our families and our language and our geographic roots. I also appreciate that the characters, despite some extraordinary traits (the protagonist of Native Speaker, for example, is a spy), are pretty normal. They are no better or worse than the rest of us. They have strengths, sure, but they aren't saints. Similarly, they have weaknesses, but they aren't rapists or murderers. The characters are just like people that any one of us might know.

In particular, both Native Speaker and Aloft strike a personal chord with me because I know that so much of who I am is because of my family, for better or for worse. In fact, I'm probably a lot like Theresa in Aloft. As a teenager, she deliberately distances herself from her family and tries to be the opposite of what her father is (hey, don't we all to some extent?). And yet, because of that she is probably even more defined by her family than her brother, Jack, even if the definition is the opposite, if that makes sense. She comes around in the end, though, and is ultimately the "glue" that brings her family closer together than ever. Okay, so I'm not so conceited as to think I'll be the glue that brings my family together, but I have come to appreciate my family a lot in my twenties.

So, I really enjoyed Aloft, but nothing like the way I did Native Speaker. I also think the latter might appeal to a broader audience, so I highly recommend it and only recommend Aloft for people who have agreed with some of my other book reviews on this blog.

Erin says

What a beautiful book. *Aloft* is the story of Jerry Battle, an almost-sixty partial-retiree who, by his own admission, floats above the problems of life through denial and self-centeredness. Chang-rae Lee doesn't make Jerry despicable, just pitiable, although there are moments in Jerry's stream-of-consciousness narration where he reveals sharp observational powers. These moments only serve to highlight his general laziness, though. The reader comes to know that Jerry could do a lot better by his family and friends if he just felt like it, but it often seems (to Jerry) like too much work.

Like *A Gesture Life*, *Aloft* deals with suburban American life, growing older in a culture ashamed of death, mental illness in a time when it was badly misunderstood (not that it is greatly understood now), and the almost-gentle racism that pervades a certain segment of middle aged white Americans, the kind that doesn't lend itself to hate speech or violence but to a subtle and pervasive separation.

My favorite part of the book is how Lee slowly reveals Jerry to be an unreliable narrator. Jerry is mostly irony-free, but he has his moments of humor and anger. I could see him making excuses for his bad behavior while simultaneously chastising himself for said behavior. The entire story is told from his point of view, but somehow the other characters are just as well-illuminated as he is. Chang-rae Lee is probably one of America's great contemporary writers, and reading his work is pure pleasure.

Book Concierge says

Audiobook performed by Don Leslie

From the book jacket: *Aloft* offers a reexamination of the American dream from the inside out, through the voice of Jerry Battle, a suburban middle-aged man who has lived his entire life on Long Island, New York. Battle's favorite diversion is to fly his small plane solo; slipping away for quick flights over the Island, Jerry has been disappearing for years. Then a family crisis occurs, and Jerry finds he must face his disengagement in his relationships.

My Reactions:

Jerry Battle is the narrator of this character-driven novel. It is his unavailability – emotionally and physically – that colors all the relationships he has. He reflects on his deceased wife, Daisy, who is apparently bi-polar, and her death, but seems really not to understand (or want to face?) what really happened. His long-term live-in girlfriend has left him, though she is still a part of his family circle since she basically raised his children and they love her. He cannot seem to admit – to himself, or more importantly to Rita – how much he misses her, or how culpable he was in destroying their relationship.

He prides himself on how well he has handled his wife's death, raised their children alone, and managed the family business, but he seems completely unaware of what is really going on. At times he behaves like a teenager – getting into ridiculous contests to prove to his ex-girlfriend, her current fiancé, and/or to himself that he is really THE ALPHA MALE. And then he's perplexed by his own son's need to prove the same ... with a bigger house, fancier cars, etc.

My reactions to Jerry were as puzzling as his own reactions to what's going on around him – I was angry, confused, frustrated, ready to give up, wanted to go on, and ultimately loved him and his family. I'll definitely try another of Lee's novels.

Don Leslie did a fine job performing the audio version. His inflection seemed to perfectly portray Jerry's emotional distance, and tardy awakening.

Mara says

I guess the point of this book is that it's kind of apathetic and just sort of drifts along with no particular direction. Which is all well and good, except that it doesn't make for a very good read. It's sort of boring and annoying. In this book, all the characters are flat, and rather unlikeable. Due to the first-person narrator, we don't even get much of a sense of the other characters; they're just sort of background-noise to the non-story being told. The effect is that we never really feel connected to the story, and don't really care about any of the characters. Also, our first-person narrator has an extreme tendency to ramble in run-on sentences. As a literary technique, I don't mind this too much, but when the character himself is boring, any little quirk in his voice becomes grating.

Nick Duretta says

For a novel like this--a portrait of a Long Island multi-generational family in the midst of many challenges--I want a flawed but sympathetic protagonist who experiences a clear transition between his state at the beginning and at the end. Here the protagonist is 60-year-old Jerry Battle, retired from running the contractor business started by his grandfather (his son is now in that role). He's never completely come to terms with the tragic death of his wife years before, and is struggling with his relationship with his girlfriend and others. Yet I never got a grasp of Jerry, who is the story's narrator. He's a weekend pilot (the title is a rather obvious metaphor for staying 'aloft' amid life's turbulence) and seems like a nice guy. Yet practically everyone harbors some degree of resentment or dislike for him. Why? I never quite got it. Plus there is far, far too much detail. Lee stuffs the book to the bursting point with tons of information on not only the main characters but practically everybody else--what they eat, where they shop, what they watched on TV at 3 p.m. Pages and pages of this, with little discernible benefit to the overall story. Yes, it's good to flesh out your characters, but give me a break.

Ron Charles says

It's early yet, and the fall season will certainly bring some wonderful novels, but it seems safe to say that "Aloft" will be one of the best books of the year. Given the beauty of Chang-rae Lee's previous work, this isn't too surprising. In 1999, "A Gesture Life" appeared on many "best of the year" lists (including ours). Before that, his first novel, "Native Speaker" (1995), won several of those second-tier prizes that sometimes signal a great talent has entered the library.

Although the Korean-born author has written specifically about the Asian-American experience, Lee's audience has always been diverse, responding to his universal themes of dislocation and identity. With "Aloft," he moves even further from the outlines of his own cultural heritage, presenting a narrator who's Italian-American, a retired landscaper in an affluent suburb on Long Island.

But issues of race are still here - everywhere, in fact. The narrator, Jerry Battle (born Battaglia), notes everyone's ethnic and racial classification with the ironic self-consciousness of a white man who knows it's not kosher to note such things anymore.

He was married to a Korean woman who died 20 years ago; his Puerto Rican girlfriend has recently left him; his daughter is engaged to an Asian-American writer; he works part time with a young Hispanic man at a travel agency. In other words, Jerry is like most Americans, pretending to be colorblind in the most colorful country on earth.

Up in the sky, though, flying his little plane, he can't see anyone's face. It's a box-seat for a man who finds it easiest to appreciate people - particularly family - when gazing down on them from a "fetching, ever-mitigating" distance of 3,000 feet.

The novel opens with Jerry's Godlike pronouncement: "Everything looks perfect to me," and for the next 350 pages, he talks on and on to us in a voice that's maddeningly self-absorbed, wonderfully witty, constantly conflicted, often wise, and ultimately redeemed.

For many years, equipped with "a wide-range of people-shedding skills," Jerry has worked to secure the kind

of isolation he's enjoying, but now living alone, cut off politely from his children and his father, he finds that the cup of absolute freedom has a bitter aftertaste.

He's not entirely sure why his girlfriend of 20 years walked out on him, but he suspects it may have something to do with keeping her a girlfriend for 20 years. His irascible, oversexed father is unhappily imprisoned in an expensive assisted-living facility, where Jerry has to visit only when the guilt becomes acute. His son has taken over the family landscaping business and turned it into a money machine that makes Jerry proud even while he worries "how this rush of prosperity is ruining him." And his daughter has a PhD in critical theory, which means that his hegemonic male privilege is the subject of her constant, dismissive analysis.

He backs away from moments of intimacy, even while craving them, complaining to us confidentially that "those closest to you seem to clam up at every chance of genuine kinship." How much neater, anyhow, to travel the world, sampling unencumbering moments of intimacy, leaping "to aid all manner of strangers and tourists and other wide-eyed foreigners."

Jerry thinks he'd be happy to keep soaring above all the messy and irreconcilable complications of family relationships - relying on what his daughter calls his "preternatural lazy-heartedness." But despite his best efforts, what he refers to as "the Real" keeps calling him back down to earth.

First, there's his son's new opulence, all the flourishes of suburban royalty from teak cabinetry to nickel-plated faucets, wonderfully satirized by Jerry, who suspects the business won't support such excess for long. But of course, he can't bring himself to ask how it's going (too personal), and he knows (or wants to believe) that his offer to help would be declined anyway.

More troubling, his daughter announces that she's pregnant and diagnosed with cancer. Furious about her decision to delay medical treatment until the baby arrives, he nevertheless knows that she won't listen to him even if he could summon up the equanimity to speak calmly before his frustration and her pride blew them back into silence.

His affections, though well muzzled, refuse to stay quiet, even after a lifetime of avoiding "in-depth and nuanced discussions." In one of several very funny scenes, he tracks down his girlfriend at the mansion of her fabulously wealthy new boyfriend and proposes. When she scoffs at him - "You have no clue what you're saying or what it might mean!" - he wagers his plane in a tennis match with her lover.

But "Aloft" is not really a book of scenes or events, as funny, moving, or tragic as those are. Lee's genius is this confidential voice, full of cultural analysis, ironic asides, sexual candor, and unconscious revelations, laced along through one breathless paragraph after another in improbably extended sentences, perpetually buoyed by wit and insight. He's perfectly captured the conflicted confidence of a man who knows he can be a jerk but hopes that knowing that might win him some consolation.

Strung between his father, who taught him how "effective it can be to say grindingly little at the very moment you ought to say a lot," and his children, who can't imagine how much he needs and loves them, Jerry must finally learn how to speak from the heart - to move beyond the "patriarchal Post-it Notes" - before his family collapses in a series of financial and physical disasters.

This feels like Rabbit country, of course, the anxieties of a suburban man so masterfully tended by John Updike in those four devastating novels. But Lee is after something altogether more hopeful here, though no less sophisticated: the anti-Rabbit, at least an antidote to Rabbitism.

Jerry runs from his responsibilities with no less vigor than Harry Angstrom, and he's grown just as rich, but when he comes finally to rest, it's not in death or the clouds, but in the deep satisfaction of embracing his family with all those annoyances and entangling affections he thought he wanted to flee.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0309/p1...>

Stephanie says

Feb 2009 book club selection.

This book was very challenging for me to get through because I can't stand long sentences. It's really tough to remember what's going on if you didn't read this in one sitting, and it's tough to read this in one sitting because I didn't feel like anything drove the storyline. There's not so much a story as it is a glimpse in a period of a time in a 59-year-old's life. I suppose it's about family. But it reads like a journal with many topical detours that may have had a purpose, but because they were so verbose, it wasn't appealing to me. Definitely raises interesting issues of race consciousness. On the whole, I'd pass.

Rose says

Like eating a bowl of whipped cream, bland and fluffy, though well-crafted and containing a suitable number of tragic life events. Reads somewhat like an homage to Richard Ford.

Donna says

This was a quick read. I liked the main character. His life was coming apart and his problems were weighing heavily on him. I could empathize with most of them and I liked him as a main character. I liked the other characters as well. I found myself wanting more description of them. Some were a little vague.

My main problem was the format. It was a narrative one and I'm not a fan of that style. This could have ended up as 2 stars, but I think the fact that the MC was well liked helped. It also had a sweet ending.

Rev. Nyarkoleptek says

I never thought I'd suggest that an author dumb it down, but here I am. *Aloft* is not a poorly-written novel -- the exact opposite, actually; you can tell Chang-rae Lee's really making use of his educational background. But that craftsmanship is the reason that I didn't buy the narrator's voice. Maybe I just don't travel in the right circles, but Jerry -- the lead character and narrator -- spoke too eloquently to be believable. He's a blue-collar working stiff! Why's his internal dialog sounding like a Princeton English professor? (Well, the book was written by a Princeton English professor. That's why.) And from what I read (which admittedly wasn't much), there's nothing to indicate that Jerry's silent eloquence bubbles up from hidden depths. No one says to him, "hey, Jer, I never had no idea ya had such a, y'know, *penetratin' worl'view*. Guess hangin' around them college bimbos rubbed off, huh? Hey, let's find us some broads and go to town."

If Lee had decided to write in third-person narration, I might have really enjoyed this book. Instead, onto the "Abandoned" shelf it goes.
