



BLOW UP

IN HER LATEST NOVEL, WRITER SUSAN CHOI TACKLES THE EXPLOSIVE NATURE OF PARANOIA AND BLAME DELIVERED UNABOMBER-STYLE

In the author's note to FBI agent and crime writer John Douglas's 1996 book *Unabomber: On the Trail of America's Most-Wanted Serial Killer*, Douglas cautions: "Mr. Kaczynski is just that—a suspect. According to our system, he and everyone else must be presumed innocent unless—and until—proven guilty in a court of law. Everything that follows should be read in that context." Theodore J. Kaczynski later pleaded guilty to four counts of mail bombing that killed two men and maimed two scientists. More than a decade later—and light-years away in the history of United States terrorism—Douglas's effort to distinguish suspects from convicted criminals seems like a relic from a less threatening age. In her latest novel, writer Susan Choi picks up the explosive subject of a "person of interest" and follows the thread of suspicion—without accusation—all the way to its breaking point. Professor Lee, an aging math teacher at a small midwestern college, survives a mail bomb that kills one of his academic colleagues. It isn't long before the FBI looks to the lonely, disgruntled immigrant—with his absent grown daughter Esther, his marital heartbreaks and occupational hostilities, and his less-than-stellar social skills—as the potential killer. Choi, 38, is no stranger to political and social radicalism on the fringes of American society. Her 2003 novel *American Woman* brilliantly reimagined Patricia Hearst and her two surviving SLA kidnappers as they hid out in upstate New York with a Japanese American outlaw named Jenny. Her 1998 debut *The Foreign Student* also charted the psychology of alienation right in the center of the heartland. Choi so often uses the sensational activities of homegrown terrorist cells, but her results are mesmerizing studies in how close a normal person can come to being a radical bomb welder against the order or a scapegoat of the system. **Christopher Bollen**

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN You just had a baby—your second. Has writing about political violence and acts of terrorism changed for you since you've had children?

SUSAN CHOI I definitely have a different take on violence. Political violence has always fascinated me—especially from the point of view of the perpetrator. I'm interested in people who go to extremes. Why do they take such risks? Why do they lose hold of their moral or ethical grounding? I've always had a voyeuristic fascination with people who commit violence for political purposes. But I have to admit now that I've become a parent, I

almost can't read about violence or watch it on the news—I do think about the children that are orphaned. I have a much more visceral reaction.

CB Political violence spins the narrative in much of your fiction. When did the fascination begin with America's radical contingent?

SC It's probably because I was a teenager during the Reagan '80s, where activism was really absent from the milieu I was brought up in. At some point I stumbled upon a book on the SDS or Students for a Democratic Society. I was infatuated with the idea of the '60s and the civil rights movement and all of the movements that seemed to have died. I was constantly wondering why that general sense of urgency in the previous era about improving the world kind of died on the vine. People stood up for things, they believed you could make a difference. Now we're such cynics. From SDS, I became interested in the Weather Underground and groups I suppose the government would now call domestic terrorists. Before 2001, I don't think we used that term—not even for idiosyncratic acts like the SLA kidnapping of Patricia Hearst or even Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Murrah Building.

CB How much creative liberty did you take when writing about Hearst and the kidnappers for *American Woman*?

SC I took all the liberties I felt like taking for the sake of a good story. I didn't really conform to a set of rules about how much fiction should be true to its nonfictional basis. One thing I did when I was researching the book was that I decided to limit myself to the public record in terms of what I wanted to learn about the SLA, because so many of them are still alive. I unintentionally ended up having dinner with one of the SLA kidnappers and getting to know him a little bit. Some friends knew about the book I was writing and they said, "Oh, you have to meet Bill." The next thing I know I was sitting at a dinner table with Bill Harris who kidnapped Patricia Hearst at gunpoint in 1974. It was really thrilling and horrifying because I knew I was going to make a character based on the actions of this guy—not based on him, based on his actions. That character was Juan who is a bit of the villain and a bit of the bozo. I felt awful because I liked Bill. I decided that couldn't happen again. I couldn't get in that situation—especially with Wendy Yoshimura, whom I based the main character Jenny on. People said, "Oh, Wendy lives in Berkeley, she works at the organic juice bar. I'm sure you can meet her." I said, "I don't want to!" The only things I want to know about her is what's been written. I didn't want to be guilty of exposing those people to a degree they hadn't already been exposed. Of course I did expose them. I brought Wendy Yoshimura back into the news, which I'm sure was the last thing she wanted.

CB The end of *American Woman* focuses on the estranged relationship between Jenny and her lonely father. *A Person of Interest* expands upon that kind of relationship, this time from the immigrant father's point of view. Was that intentional?

SC You're right. I've never thought of that before. There's a lot of my relationship with my father in this book, although we aren't estranged. We actually get along very well. There's a lot of my father in Professor Lee—so much so that when my father read the book, he needed to say, "I'm not Professor Lee!"

CB Does that make you the missing daughter?

SC I knew my father was going to see that book as a version of our lives. So I said to him, Think of this book as the dark twin. Esther is my evil twin, the worst case scenario version of me—the one who didn't go to Yale, didn't get good grades, but also ran off to the wilderness to feed eagles. I have fantasies like that. I want to go and do something totally unrelated to words. I want to go out west and work for a wildlife conservation. I know I'd never do it but I harbor those fantasies.

CB For *A Person of Interest*, did you revisit the Unabomber case for inspiration? That's the obvious source for bombs in math departments.

SC I borrowed a lot of aspects from the Unabomber. It was a good excuse to read up on Ted Kaczynski. I was always fascinated with him—a person going to true political extremes. He does have a politic. It isn't totally coherent but it isn't incoherent. And I did a lot of research into this whole "person of interest" idea that started with Wen Ho Lee in the late '90s—the Chinese Los Alamos scientist accused of sharing nuclear secrets with China. He was either totally framed by the government or he completely got away with it. But he was never properly prosecuted, just persecuted. Including by *The New York Times*, who went with its government sources. Eventually the case collapsed—and a U.S. district judge eventually issued an apology to Wen Ho Lee on behalf of the government for the way he'd been a victim of a witch hunt. I also looked to other persons of interest—basically it's the whole idea of being tried in the court of public opinion before you've been accused. The government can finger you and say, There's something weird about this person. Due process is altogether forgotten. It's the power of a label. Now you hear "person of interest" all the time. I remember with Lee it was so unfamiliar, there were press conferences where reporters would ask what it meant. They would ask the FBI, Does "person of interest" have a legal definition? They had to issue a statement explaining that this term had no legal meaning—no meaning, but such power.

CB What other persons of interest did you look at specifically?

SC Stephen Hatfield, who the government kept accusing of mailing anthrax. They would never name him as a suspect but they would search his house, put squad cars on his tail. The other person of interest I looked at was Richard Jewell, who was the guy in Atlanta during the 1996 Summer Olympics who was suspected of planting the pipe bomb in Centennial Park.

CB In *American Woman*, you go into great detail about the Japanese-American internment during World War II. And in *A Person of Interest*, Lee is an Asian immigrant. Do you feel locating your characters as Asians in the United States is a vital aspect of your writing?

SC I am preoccupied with it. By not giving Lee a particular homeland, I was fighting that urge in myself to identify roots. There is a moment in *American Woman* when I write that Jenny and Pauline think they are making history but history really made them. I do have a preoccupation with history and context and the things in life that are outside of our control that form us. I refused to give Lee a back story. I didn't want it to be about where he was from but where he is now. In a way, I shifted the focus outside of him to how others would see him—so it didn't matter if he was from Korea or Taiwan or Mainland China, it was just that he was foreign, not native. And in the absence of other mitigating circumstances, his foreign birth ended up making it easier for suspicion to fall on him.

CB The FBI also appears in your book. What case was the inspiration for that?

SC Again I borrowed a lot from the Unabomber. In my first draft I just made up the investigative stuff. But for my next draft, I went and got someone from the FBI. I talked to several people, one of whom was a retired field agent who no longer worked at the bureau anymore. He had actually cuffed Ted Kaczynski. After about six calls passing me around, I finally got this guy on the phone. The way in which they apprehend the bomber in my book is very closely based on the way this agent described catching Kaczynski. All of the leaves were off the trees, the snow had fallen, they couldn't sneak up on him, they had sharpshooters around who had nothing to do with it because they had nowhere to hide. It ended up being this agent and two other guys who just walked up to the door. I had a fabulous interview with this man over the phone. I rewrote the ending of the book around his story. I kept saying, "You know I'm a novelist, right?" It's amazing what you can find out if you just make some calls.

Detail of *Untitled* (portrait), 2005

Artwork Gardar Eide Einarsson

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A Person of Interest is out in January 2008 from Viking