Books with local settings reveal 21st-century melting pot

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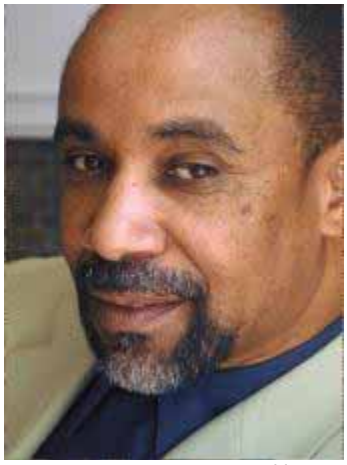
Two new novels place their characters in an Atlanta both familiar and strange.

The stories develop at different ends of the metro area — and in different worlds. Yet both novels are concerned with hardscrabble lives, upward striving and the tectonic stress of disparate cultures bumping up against each other.



W.A. Bridges Jr.
(ENLARGE)

Emory professor Nathan McCall wrote 'Them,' a story of a neighborhood transformation.

Kalman Zabarsky photo courtesy Pantheon Books
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Ha Jin details the anxieties of living in a new culture in 'A Free Life.'

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Former Emory University professor Ha Jin transported readers to his native provincial China with his previous fiction, "Waiting," "The Crazed" and "War Trash." In his new book, "A Free Life," (Pantheon, $26) Jin follows an expatriate intellectual, Nan Wu, and his family to a blue-collar Lilburn neighborhood, where Wu stifles his academic hopes in exchange for the practical grind of running a small restaurant.

Current Emory lecturer Nathan McCall traces a migration of a different sort in his first novel, "Them" (Atria, $25), as gentrification brings white residents into a black community. McCall, author of the best-selling memoir "Makes Me Wanna Holler" (and a former Atlanta Journal-Constitution reporter) sets his action in the Old Fourth Ward, up the street from Martin Luther King Jr.'s childhood home.

Both authors draw on their Atlanta experiences to sketch scenes that include many familiar landmarks, from the Emory campus to the King Center. They also make the city's dynamics part of the action.

The Old Fourth Ward has, indeed, been transformed, as shotgun shacks and cottages are torn down to make way for new $300,000 houses. Much of that change is due to the in-migration of middle-class homeowners to a locale that has bounced from affluence to urban blight and back again.

First-hand experience

McCall stumbled on the story because he almost became part of it. He was unhappy with his Emory neighborhood and went house-hunting on Randolph Street.

The area was in mid-morph. "I saw this white guy sweeping the walk, and it was apparent he had bought a house there," said McCall in a recent interview. "I thought, I wonder what that's like for him? And I wonder what it's like for the black people who had been there all along? Then everything came together."

McCall imagined Sean and Sandy Gilmore, an earnest white couple from Forsyth County, moving next door to a thoughtful but marginal character named Barlowe Reed.

Barlowe, a 40-ish single black man with a steady job as a printer, shares his rental house with his charming but thuggish nephew Tyrone, who contributes to the rent money

despite his lack of a job. Sandy engages in uneasy conversations with Barlowe as they work in their respective yards on opposite sides of the backyard fence.

Those conversations change both Sandy and Barlowe, in unexpected ways. But their two worlds prove ultimately, explosively, incompatible.

In the course of the novel McCall describes a disappearing world, of old men swapping lies on front porches, of sketchy characters hanging at a neighborhood dive called the Purple Palace and friendly drunks snoozing in the random backyard.

The new settlers find this scenery unsettling. Security fences go up. Cops lock up drunks. And the mini-mart turns into a cappuccino-dispensing coffee shop. Some neighbors stage protest meetings, but market forces eventually roll over all resistance, and old-timers start pounding for-sale signs in their yards to cash in on the boom.

"It's really a microcosm of the history of America," says McCall. "When people with some degree of power move into the space of people who are relatively powerless, the people who are powerless are viewed as a problem. Ultimately there is no coexistence."

Leaving China behind

In "A Free Life," the new arrivals are Nan Wu and his wife and son; the parents are struggling upwards from menial jobs to become owners of a small business. Their Lilburn world, though scruffy, is a step up from renting attic space and grubby apartments.

The novel's conflict centers on warring instincts within Nan. He deals with his crushed aspirations to become a poet; he worries about his compromised marriage; he faces a divided self.

Having abandoned his country after the massacre on Tiananmen Square, Nan realizes that he must abandon his own tongue if he wants to become a published poet. It is a step away from his true self, and Jin, who taught writing at Emory from 1993 until 2001, went through that same crisis.

"I feel the pain, too, in having to write in this language to claim my own existence," he said in a recent interview from his Boston home.

Jin was one of a few scholars in China to earn a master's degree in American literature. He was working on a Ph.D. at Brandeis University in 1989 when the Chinese government staged its notorious crackdown.

Like his protagonist, Jin decided to remain in the United States and become a citizen. He hasn't been back to China since, and hasn't seen his mother since 1985.

"I was eager to go back and visit friends and family, but later when I became a citizen, that desire was almost gone," he says. "I'm not that eager any more. My books have been banned in China, and that makes me uneasy to go. My books are like my children."

Unlike his protagonist Nan, Jin settled into an academic job the year after graduating. "This is not autobiographical at all," he says. "I was much more fortunate."

He did, however, work at restaurant jobs as a grad student, being promoted from busboy to waiter, and then demoted back to busboy. "I couldn't remember the wine list," he explains.

He studied Chinese restaurants in Duluth, Lilburn and Lawrenceville to get the details right, learning about the sizable Asian community in Gwinnett County and elsewhere in metro Atlanta.

'Couldn't cut corners'

At the end of "A Free Life," Nan Wu, who has made a success of his restaurant, sells it to become a night watchman and to write poetry. Jin made his mark first as a poet, and he includes an appendix of 25 poems written from the point of view of Nan's character, and a notebook detailing his struggles.

His first version of the book ended with Nan's radical choice, but didn't include the poems.

"I realized I couldn't cut corners, otherwise Nan would appear like a crazed man," he says. "That's why I wrote those poems."

A real chef/poet started the story in Jin's mind — an immigrant from Hong Kong who owned a small Chinese restaurant in Waltham, Mass. He self-published a small book of his own poems, written in archaic Chinese, which came into Jin's hands in 1991. "I was very touched by the book," he says.

"On the one hand the guy was struggling to survive, at the same time he was trying hard to be a poet. That was the beginning."

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