

Girl has courage of her father's convictions

Teen novel breathes new life into Montrealer's fight to get dissident freed from Chinese prison

Nine Days, by Fred Hiatt (Delacorte Press, \$21)

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This is a tale of two girls: one real, one fictional.

It's also about two fathers: one a political prisoner, the other a central character in an adventure novel for young adults.

Finally, it's about another father, a writer who connects the two worlds, using the power of his pen to illuminate one family's struggle for freedom.



Ti-Anna Wang

The true story is dramatic in itself: In 2002, an exiled founder of China's democracy movement is abducted, put on trial in secret, given a life sentence and locked away in prison. In Montreal, his teenage daughter vows to get him released. She visits her father in jail in China, lobbies for him in Ottawa, Washington and Geneva, moves to Taiwan to study and be near him, gives interviews – all in vain.

A decade passes, the teenager grows into a young woman, the father remains behind bars.

Then comes the fiction. An American writer – a senior journalist at the Washington Post – meets the activist's daughter and is so impressed by her story, he goes off and writes a teen novel about it. It's about, well, a Chinese dissident who disappears on a trip to Hong Kong and whose teenage daughter runs away from home with a friend to track him down. The duo get into all sorts of adventures there, trying to solve the mystery.

In both stories, true and make-believe, the heroine is a determined student named Ti-Anna. Her parents gave her that unusual name in homage to the victims of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing in 1989, in which thousands of Chinese were killed or injured in the Communist regime's brutal repression of pro-democracy protests.

The real Ti-Anna – Ti-Anna Wang – was born and raised in Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood. In the book, she's Ti-Anna Chen, born in China and raised outside Washington.

Without the book, there would be no story to tell now.

It's called *Nine Days*, and it's written by Fred Hiatt, a former foreign correspondent in Tokyo and Moscow who now edits the Post's editorial and op-ed pages. Thanks to him, the nightmare that hit the Wang family over a decade ago is now coming into renewed focus.

In June 2002, Ti-Anna's father, Wang Bingzhang, co-founder of the overseas Chinese pro-democracy movement, went on a trip to northern Vietnam to meet Chinese labour activists and disappeared. Kidnapped by Chinese government agents, he was spirited across the border, charged with espionage and terrorism, given a one-day trial in which he was not allowed to defend himself, and was sent to jail in southern China.

It took six months for his family in Montreal – Ti-Anna, who was then 13 years old, her two brothers and their mother, Chin Ning, Wang's estranged wife – to learn of his whereabouts. Supported by Amnesty International and Canadian human rights activists like B.C.'s Jennifer Wade and former Liberal justice minister Irwin Cotler, they tried without success to get Wang released from his cell in Shaoguan Prison.

Now 65 years old, held in solitary confinement and allowed only one letter a month, Wang has suffered several strokes and, according to his family, is increasingly losing his grip on reality. His daughter last saw him in December 2008, one of only four prison visits she has been allowed to make since her first at age 16. Today, as she marks her 24th birthday, she feels like a veteran of a cause that stubbornly refuses to have a happy ending.

The book has added a new dimension to her pain. Though she's happy it's publicizing her family's plight, it has also made her feel inadequate, somehow.

"It's kind of strange to be fictionalized into a heroine, because you can't help but make that comparison with your actual self – and the fictional Ti-Anna is a hard act to follow," Wang said last Saturday over Skype from an apartment she shares

with three roommates in Taipei, the Taiwanese capital. She has been there since last September, studying advanced Mandarin on a nine-month language-training scholarship at a local university.

"In the novel, Ti-Anna is extremely courageous, extremely filial," said Wang, who was not involved in the writing of the book but gave her consent to publish after reading the manuscript. "She made me realize I wasn't capable of the things she had done," like holding clandestine meetings with shadowy contacts in Hong Kong and Hanoi that lead her to uncover a human-trafficking ring.

Real life calls for a less showy kind of heroism, but at her young age, Wang sometimes wishes she were more like the fictional Ti-Anna. The brashness of her fictional self pleases this shy, soft-spoken young woman. If she doesn't feel she can measure up, that's also one less burden to shoulder. "It's best not to have people have such high expectations of you," Wang said. "I have courage, I guess, but it's a different kind of courage."

Her relationship with her father is different, too. In the book, Ti-Anna's dad is a dedicated family man. In real life, Ti-Anna's dad, a McGill University-trained pathologist, left the family when she was 2 years old to devote himself full time to the pro-democracy cause and the peripatetic lifestyle it required. The family was living in New York City at the time; after the separation, Ti-Anna's mom moved with the kids back to Montreal.

"It touched me, in the book, that Ti-Anna is driven by the purest kind of daughterly love to go on a trip and try to find her father," said Wang. "In my case, that feeling is a lot more complicated; things are always less straightforward in real life. I've spoken to a lot of other families of activists, and though it may seem strange from other people's perspective, (not having a father around) is actually quite normal."

Prison has made them even more out of touch. Because of her activism, Wang hasn't been able to get a visa into China since 2008. Her father appreciates what she's doing for him as his kind of personal lobbyist, but has told her he wishes she'd pursue her dreams and become a lawyer like her brother. With a BA in East Asian Studies, she was accepted into McGill's law school, but deferred that to take the language scholarship in Taiwan.

Now she's not sure law's her thing – and her father is oblivious.

Does Wang have a book in her, as well, something autobiographical, perhaps, she could write about her and her father? She has thought of framing a story around their exchange of letters – there are hundreds at this point – but worries

that they're getting a bit weird for general consumption. Her father has developed an "unhealthy fixation" on Chinese etymology, she said.

"As a way to pass time, he likes to study the root of Chinese characters, and has come up with his own rationalization as to why Chinese characters are the way they are and how they evolve. Of course, with limited access to research materials like a computer, some of the things he writes about are just borderline fantasy."

He doesn't yet know about *Nine Days*; his daughter only told him about it in her last letter, and since his jailers usually delay delivery of the post for several months, it'll be a while before he does. In any case, he'll never get to actually read it while he's in prison; all material has to be in Chinese, the book so far has not been translated, and in any case, the subject matter is taboo.



Ti-Anna Wang, left, and *Nine Days* author Fred Hiatt, right, with David Kramer, president of Freedom House in Washington, where the novel was launched. *Photo: Liu Tai*

"I did run into somebody from the embassy (in Washington), who said that he had ordered it," Hiatt, the book's Harvard-educated author, said earlier this month from his home in Maryland. "I said, 'Oh, good, maybe you can translate it,' and

he said, 'Why bother? It will never be published.' " Hiatt gave a wry laugh at the memory, and added optimistically: "But I have hopes. Things in China could change."

He and Wang first met in December 2008. Wang had moved to Washington after graduating from Marianopolis College, intending to meet legislators, human-rights groups and Chinese pro-democracy activists and plead her father's case.

Wang wrote an op-ed for the *Post*; Hiatt, who gets 100 submissions like that a day, was impressed by a lot of things: Wang's name, her youth, her verve, the quality of her writing and, of course, her dad's story.

He decided to publish the piece. They met for coffee afterward.

"That was the first and last time that I ever saw her, up until last summer," he recalled. "It's pretty unusual to meet (people who submit op-eds), but I thought her story was unusual and kind of remarkable and admirable. It took a lot of guts for someone her age to come to Washington, not really knowing anybody and do what she could to bring attention to her father's case, which itself is so amazing."

They found they had other things in common – like Montreal. Hiatt's mother-in-law was from here, and her twin brothers still live here; there's also a passel of cousins near St. Sauveur. Hiatt and his family visit quite often.

After meeting Wang, Hiatt got busy the following summer on the novel. It wasn't his first; he'd already published an adult novel about Japan called *The Secret Sun*, and had also authored two children's picture books, *If I Were Queen of the World* and *Baby Talk*, for his two eldest kids. Since his youngest was now in middle school, Hiatt decided to write a young adult novel for him, using Wang's story as his inspiration.

So one family's story nurtured another's. If the Wangs were separated by geopolitics, the Hiatts came together in literature. And both would gain in the process.

Unsure the novel would ever be published, however, Hiatt didn't tell Wang he was writing it until after it was complete. When Random House, which owns Delacorte Press, accepted the manuscript, he sent it to her. She read it, liked it, and wrote a three-page afterword to tell young readers "the real story" behind the book. Last month, she returned to Washington for 10 days for the launch. And the interviews began anew.

Human rights abuses were back on the agenda – with a twist.

"I wanted to write a book that would get kids interested in these issues," said Hiatt, "but that would also be fun to read, be funny and have characters who are entertaining. If I'd set out to do a non-fiction book about Wang Bingzhang and his family, it would be a very different book." Added Ti-Anna: "It has the opportunity to reach a much larger audience, young people who aren't normally interested in human rights. It's not intimidating for them to read."

The book also serves a high purpose: It's an antidote to China-cheerleading.

"In this day and age, when everybody wants to do business with China and get visas into China, the folks who are talking about democracy are, for a lot of people, an inconvenience," said Hiatt.

"Ti-Anna wants to be more than an inconvenience. If she doesn't remind people that her father and many people like him are there in prison, then who's going to?"

"They were peacefully expressing their beliefs, and now they're locked up."

(According to Amnesty International, about 2,000 people are in Chinese jails for political crimes and another quarter of a million languish in prison or labour camps uncharged of any crime.)

What's next for Wang? Wang will return to Canada this summer, bringing a group of Taiwanese exchange students to Vancouver and the Okanagan Valley for a spell (her father's side of the family lives in B.C.), then coming east to visit her mom, who still lives in the ground-floor home where she raised her family just north of Jeanne Mance Park.



Ti-Anna Wang and her mother, Chin Ning, in Washington, D.C. for the launch of Nine Days

After that, who knows? She might still stay abroad – perhaps moving to Singapore in the fall. She doesn't really know. She only knows the fight for her father's freedom will go on.

"However naive it may seem to believe that one individual can make a difference, the point is that we should not allow ourselves to be mere victims of adversity," Wang writes in her afterword to Nine Days. "With our rights come responsibilities to use whatever strengths we have and stand on the right side of history."

Or, on a more personal note as she put it over that Skype line from Taipei, her voice tired and echoey in the late-night confines of her apartment: "I think I've been blessed in as many ways as I've been cursed."

"My father's plight has, on the one hand, absolutely devastated my family. But on the other hand, my family and I have also been the recipients of so much humanity."

She paused. "It's hard to explain, but all in all, it's been a privilege."

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Ti-Anna's op-ed in the Washington Post: tinyurl.com/cyhwmbx

Fred Hiatt's website: fredhiatt.com

Audio interview of them both on NPR: tinyurl.com/bu8qohb

The Wang Family website: www.wangbingzhang.org

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