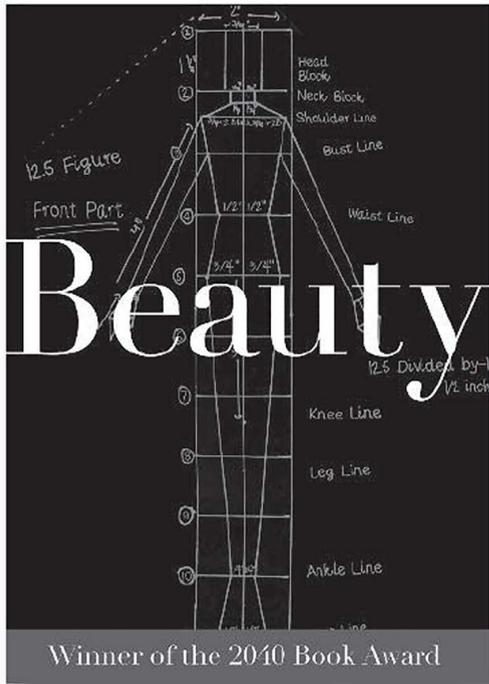


CHRISTINA CHIU



# The Eye

*Beauty*

By Christina Chiu

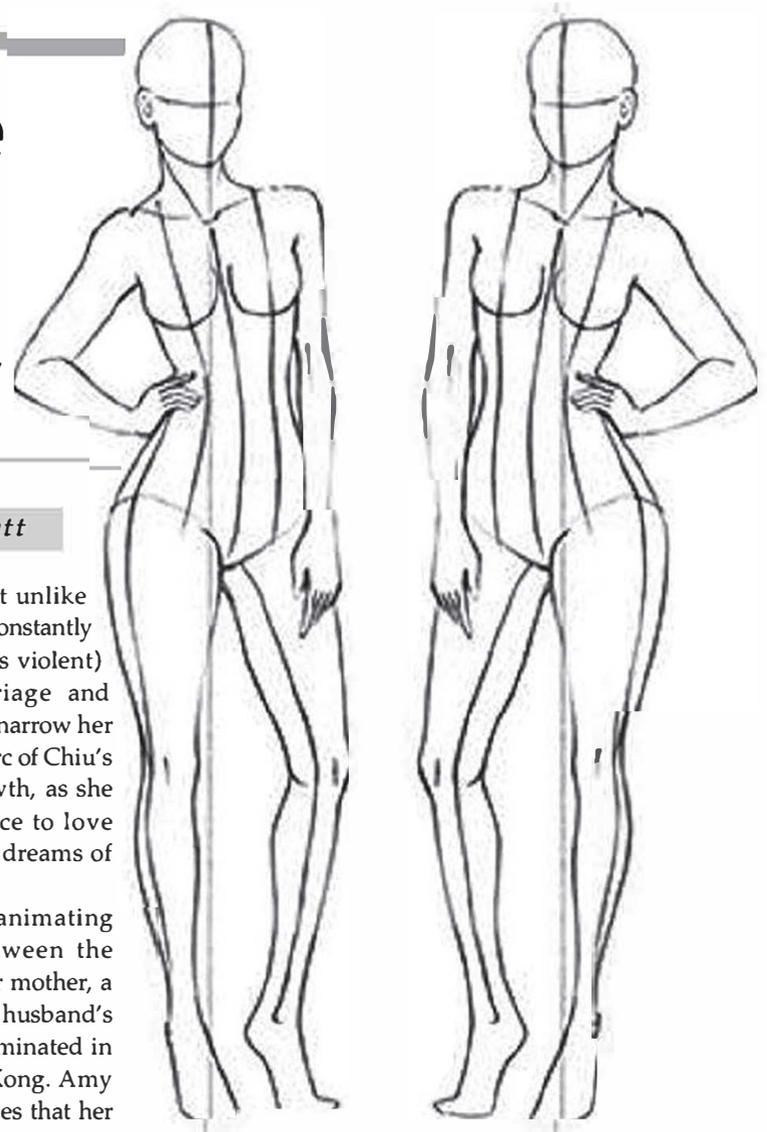
Santa Fe, NM; 2040 Books, 2020,

276 pp., \$15.95, paperback

*Reviewed by Heather Hewett*

beautiful and empowered woman but unlike her fictional white counterparts, Amy is constantly targeted by an exoticizing (and at times violent) male gaze. As she falls into marriage and motherhood, a series of traumatic events narrow her life's possibilities. At the same time, the arc of Chiu's novel allows us to witness Amy's growth, as she develops the resilience and confidence to love herself and reconnect with her lifelong dreams of making beautiful things.

The novel begins with the story's animating conflict: the rocky relationship between the narrator, sixteen-year-old Amy, and her mother, a fashionable but mercurial woman whose husband's frequent business trips abroad have culminated in an affair and another family in Hong Kong. Amy feels cast off and unloved, and she worries that her



Christina Chiu's fast-paced and unsettling novel, *Beauty*, follows the life trajectory of Amy Wong, a second-generation Chinese American living in New York City whose plans to forge a career in fashion and find love get derailed. Like the sexually liberated foursome in the HBO series *Sex and the City*, Amy is a



Asian Chalon

Christina Chiu

mother blames her for their abandonment. Unlike her older sister, who excelled in their suburban high school and is on track to become a doctor, Amy's mediocre grades confirm feelings of not being good enough. Her feelings of worthlessness are only heightened when her mother impulsively flies to Hong Kong, dropping her off without warning at her sister's apartment in New York City.

As readers, we aren't fully aware of Amy's physical allure until a pair of boots catches her eye in a storefront window. She is attracted by the shoes "Floral and paisley-drops. Open-toed, trimmed with leather, knee high" but she doesn't have the money to buy them. The shoe salesman ogles her, rapturous about her body. Amy enjoys the attention: "Beautiful. No one has ever called me that." What ensues is a deeply disturbing scene during which Amy is simultaneously repulsed and attracted by her first sexual encounter—a statutory rape.

Amy's sense of her sexuality develops as she embarks on a series of relationships with men. Towards the end of her time as a student at Parsons, she meets famous designer and "fashion icon" Jeff Jones, who is immediately attracted to her. Even though she initially rejects him, they end up in an intense, on-again/off-again relationship. They hurtle into marriage and parenthood, forcing Amy to abandon her own career aspirations as she cares for their tantrum-prone child while her husband focuses his attention on his business and, eventually, other women.

**“Chiu’s compelling interest lies in beauty, and her novel explores its multiple meanings.”**

There's more that follows (divorce, a tragic family accident, a rebound romance), which leads to Amy's nadir: a second marriage to a man who turns abusive and violent. Her experience confirms what has become increasingly difficult to ignore in the #MeToo era: rape and sexual assault can happen to anyone. Amy must learn to contend with men who wish to control her body and her life, rejecting the shame and low self-worth that began in her childhood. She must find a way back to her own joy for fashion, her desire to create beautiful clothes, and her ability to love and trust herself.

**W**hile conversations about sexual violence have increasingly entered the mainstream in the past two and a half years, working to shift cultural norms that blame and silence victims, #MeToo has still centered around the experiences and stories of white women. Chiu's novel reveals how sexism and racism can intersect to produce a particularly virulent form of objectification: the "Asian fetish," a centuries-old Western fascination with "Oriental" women that frames them as exotic, erotic, and submissive. Amy is beautiful, but it is her identity as a young Asian woman that seems to make her a sexual target for the men around her. At the same time, Amy is no shrinking violet. Even though she possesses less clout than someone like Jeff Jones, she has agency and desires of her own. The strength of Chiu's novel lies in its unflinching examination of the shared messiness of interpersonal dynamics, even when one member of the couple seeks to dominate the other.

*Beauty* is tied to another story: the persistent whiteness of the book publishing industry, which translates into how many writers of color get published and what kinds of work they are expected to produce. *Beauty* was published by 2040 Books, an imprint founded to address racial disparities in the industry. Part of the Santa Fe Writers Project, an independent press, its name refers to the year 2040, when, according to the US census, "more than half of all Americans will be part of a minority group." *Beauty* won the imprint's James Alan McPherson Award; the inaugural year of the contest, Bonnie Chau won for *All Roads Lead to Blood*, a short story collection also focusing on second-generation Chinese Americans.

As the title suggests, Chiu's compelling interest lies in beauty, and her novel explores its multiple meanings. Physical beauty, of course, is initially something that (male) others see in Amy, sparking their desire for her. But ultimately a more multifaceted notion of beauty emerges as she comes to recognize beautiful qualities within herself and also within others, outside the male gaze and the strictures of heteronormativity. From her mother, Amy learns that beauty is something that you work at—taking the time to put yourself together, to care for yourself—as well as something that you learn to appreciate, an awareness that is cultivated. Spending time in her mother's closet teaches Amy to recognize craftsmanship and quality, characteristics that elevate clothes from their everyday utility function towards the realm of art. Jeff Jones has impeccable taste, and despite his flaws, he sees Amy's capacities for discernment as

well as vision. Amy's journey leads back to her own creative process as a designer and a maker of bespoke shoes. But beauty also fuels an industry, and the novel reveals how Jeff's company is torn between the artistic inclinations of its designers and the demands of its investors. At a time of growing awareness of the environmental problems tied to consumerism and the fashion industry (particularly fast fashion), I appreciated how Chiu's novel presented a nuanced, complicated view of the individuals working inside this sector. Had I not read *Beauty*, I confess that I might have immediately dismissed someone like Jeff Jones out of hand; and while I still found much of his elitist and self-centered behavior distasteful, his own maturation, coupled with his changing relationship with Amy and their child, challenged my knee-jerk inclinations.

My main quibble with the novel emerges out of the relatively long time span it charts. Because Chiu has to cover a lot of territory in order to get us through all the plot events, each chapter skips forward in time. While this allows the novel to cover a great deal of time, the result occasionally feels a bit clunky. In the moments when the narrator switches into exposition, I felt jolted out of the story. This contrasts with other scenes when I was fully pulled into the story (sometimes uncomfortably so). Chiu's talents as a writer shine at these moments, which are not only well-crafted but feel deeply true, at times raw. As our culture continues to grapple with the meanings and effects of the #MeToo movement, her voice is a courageous addition to our understanding of the intersections of race, gender, and sexual politics.

**Heather Hewett** last wrote about Bassey Ikpi's *I'm Telling the Truth, But I'm Lying* for *WRB* and is currently at work on a volume focusing on the #MeToo movement and literary studies. She is an associate professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and an affiliate with the English Department, at the State University of New York at New Paltz.

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