Sarika: Good morning. Thanks for listening to "Between the Covers" on KBOO 90.7 FM in Portland. I'm guest host, Sarika Mehta. Today, we're featuring an interview with author, Jean Kwok, whose debut novel, "Girl in Translation" earned high acclaim. The book features a story of a Chinese girl, Kimberly, who immigrated with her mother from Hong Kong to Brooklyn. Their story parallels Jean Kwok's own life with tales of working in a sweatshop, struggling to negotiate between two vastly different worlds, and striving for success in order to survive.

"Girl in Translation" was published back in 2010, and Jean Kwok has appeared on KBOO previously. This time, she made a special visit back to Portland as the featured author of the 2013 PCC Reads initiative. I met up with her back in April at the Portland Community College Cascades campus.

Jean Kwok, welcome back to KBOO. Thank you so much for chatting with me.

Jean: Oh, I'm thrilled to be here.

Sarika: First, this book I know is based on real life experiences that you had. What inspired you to write this book or how did you decide when you were going to do it?

Jean: I think that in many ways the decision to write a book creeps up on you. I always knew that I had an unusual background because we moved from Hong Kong to the U.S. when I was five. Then, we started living in this rundown, unheated, roach-infested apartment, and at the same time, we started working in a sweatshop in Chinatown in a clothing factory. Even though I was only five years old, I did as well.

I always knew that that was material I wanted to write about. I think that at the heart of that material was my mother. Because no matter how hard I had it as a child, she had it even harder. I remember that apartment was icy, icy cold in the winter because there was no heating system. She would turn on the oven and open it and that was our only source of heat in the whole apartment. Then, we always had work that she brought home from the factory. Every night when I went to sleep, I remember her sitting there by that open oven working, falling asleep, and working with her head drooping until deep into the night because our work was never done. I think that image and that concept of my mother always drove me to want to be a writer.

I made the decision when I was in college at Harvard. It was a hard decision to make because I had to choose a lack of financial stability to make that decision. It was something I actually always had to do. I'm very glad I've done it.

Sarika: Absolutely. In your book and obviously in your real life, you've had a pretty intense childhood experience with working in a sweatshop, living in a home that was barely livable by any human standard. A lot of people, I don't think that they know that this life exists for many, many immigrant families, especially in New York and in at that time. When you were writing this, how did you cope with dealing with the content of the book, in something you were so heavily invested?

Jean: I think that I basically dealt with it by lying to myself because I was like, "Well, I'll write this as a work of a fiction and since I write it as a work of fiction, nobody's ever going to know that it happened to me." That was what I told myself, and it turned out to be completely untrue (laughs).

Of course, the moment that the book came into the world, the very first question on everyone's mind was exactly what you just said which is, "Can this happen in America? Do people live like that? Is that possible?" I realized at that point that it was an important part of the message of my book to stand up and say, "Actually, yes they do, and yes we did. We lived exactly like that." Of course, the book is a work of fiction, but the apartment in the book, the factory, those descriptions are all completely true. It was hard to write about them, but it was necessary as well. I think that's why I did it.

Sarika: I was curious - since your book was published in 2010 till now especially here at the PCC campus for this big PCC Reads initiative, how have people responded to your experiences and your writing?

Jean: Oh, in the most wonderful ways. I've been so lucky because so many people have written me or come up to me to say, "I understand this book because I can identify with it." Not just people who are immigrants but people who have experienced that feeling of being an outsider or of having overcome difficulties, and I think that's why the book speaks to people. It's the best thing in the world when I hear it because it makes me feel like, "Well, that was really why I wanted to write that book."

I'm so thrilled that it touched somebody who was maybe in a position similar to that of mine or they're the daughter of someone

like that or the friend, not just Chinese immigrants but also Italian, German, all types, and also even people like deaf. Someone who was deaf came up to me and said, "Oh, it captures so well that feeling of being the other side."

Sarika: That's a good segue into my next question that you were experiencing: Basically you having a double life being a child and an immigrant and having to hide what you're experiencing at school from your mother. And similarly hiding what you experienced at home and in the factory from your school life, especially at the prep school stage. Talk about that experience, that entire population you were just describing, that these people will deal with.

Jean: I think that growing up with a foot in different worlds is something that a lot of people can identify with, and it's difficult. When I was growing up, I never told any of my friends about my real life, about where we came from or how poor we were because I wanted to leave it behind us. I had told a friend or two when I was much younger, and they didn't believe me. They'd ask their parents and then the parents come back and say, "No, no, no, no, no. No one lives like that in America. Kids don't work in factories in America." I think that was difficult.

Then, when my book came out, I noticed someone said to me, he said, "Thank goodness you wrote this because I have tried to tell my wife what my life was like when I worked in a factory. But she couldn't really understand it until she read the book, what that was like from moment to moment." Yes, your two lives become very separate because you don't know how to bridge that gap. You don't know how to tell people, "Well, that's where I came from," because it seems so different from what everyone else goes through.

I guess I realized for myself in the process of having this book be published and be so well-received that actually so many people have secret lives like that. It's a wonderful thing when we can begin to have a dialogue about it.

Sarika: There are two things that I noticed in the book, speaking of language, the way from Kimberly's perspective, how she would hear what people are saying and it was misunderstood. And similarly, using the Cantonese idioms as they're translated into English. Talk about how you played with language in the book.

Jean: Yeah. That was something really important to me, the use of language in the book because what I hoped when I wrote the book was that I hoped to have the reader undergo the experience of

being an immigrant. I didn't want them to hear about it. I wanted them to really feel what it's like to be on the other side of that language barrier. That partly was also the reason that I wrote the book as fiction so that I could play with those things.

I thought as somebody who has grown up bilingual, I know that I don't really translate from one language to another. It's really that information comes in and I send it out in whichever language is appropriate. I thought well, that's actually how the book has to be written.

When Kimberly hears Chinese which is her language at the beginning, she hears it fluently and that makes us and the readers fluent in Chinese as well. When they use Cantonese idioms like, "Oh, it's like picking up a dead chicken," that means, actually, that's a great thing because it means there's a chicken dinner lying for you free at your feet. The non-Chinese reader can experience that.

More importantly, that when Kimberly is learning English and she hears somebody say something, it sounds to her like, "Blah blah blah blah blah word I understand blah blah blah blah blah." So, because of that, Kimberly hears English, then parts of that are gibberish, and parts of that are words she can understand. That allows us as the reader to know what it's like to need to respond, to need to react, and yet, not be able to because we did not understand what was being said to us.

Sarika: Yeah. That is a really important point that hopefully, a lot of educators and students took away from this book. Have you gotten any responses from educators?

Jean: Oh, so many. Yeah, so many because the book has been chosen for many common reads in a lot of colleges and universities and has also been adopted in many high schools. In fact, Primary Source has created an entire teacher's tool kit around the book with homework, exercises, video, and history. There's a link to it on my website. That's incredibly important to me because I love the fact that educators are using the book to reach students who might not be accessed otherwise. I've heard also teachers say to me, "I think I'm a better teacher having read the book because I understand more the limitations that a child may be facing but is afraid to tell me."

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Sarika: If you're just tuning in, you're listening to "Between the Covers" on KBOO, 90.7 FM in Portland. I'm guest host, Sarika Mehta, and you're listening to an interview with award winning author, Jean

Kwok. She's the author of "Girl in Translation," and this book, while a work of fiction, illustrates the secret double life of Jean Kwok's childhood in Brooklyn.

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Sarika: There's one other, there were two other points about how a child might view the world such as counting the material cost of things in the number of skirts. And another incident where Kimberly has to take Current Events quizzes which is a perfectly valid and good (laughs) educational tool, but the teacher just assumed that everybody has access to the *New York Times*. Talk about that experience.

Jean: I think that's such an astute question because it's one of the traumas of my youth (laughs) was that we had those Current Events quizzes. I was good at school. I was lucky to have a gift for school like Kimberly and that was my way out of that life, but there were things that I could not compensate for. One of them was the daily Current Events quiz because exactly like her, I had no access to an English newspaper. I was at the factory until late in the night. I couldn't listen to the radio, couldn't watch TV.

I just ... and my teacher ... the thing is I should have told my teacher, but I didn't. I think that the child I was at that age just did not have it within her capabilities to open her mouth and tell her teacher the truth of her situation, and I didn't. It didn't occur to the teacher that it was impossible for somebody in her class to do that, so I failed them. I just failed every single day, and it ... I mean when I was younger, exercises like... make a collage with old magazines in your house, we had no magazines. I mean I didn't have glue. I didn't have markers. I didn't have all of that stuff, but I wasn't going to tell anyone because I was embarrassed about it. I think that's a difficulty that a lot of working class people have.

Sarika: Absolutely. Speaking of that, the same double life question with respect for authority, whether it was teachers, your mother, Kimberly's mother, or Aunt Paula and how to negotiate the world between how we stand up for ourselves, how we respect elders, and then protect ourselves at the same time.

Jean: It is really difficult. I think that balance is kind of at the heart of being in a diverse society like the one that we live in that I think from the parents' point of view, it's really difficult to let the children go because they've already let them go so much. They've already gone so far in terms of how they feel, but it's never as far as the child wants (laughs). The child always wants more freedom, more ability to make their own choices, all of those things.

I mean I think a part of the reason I wrote the book was that I also hoped to tell Kimberly's mother's story, to let people know that this is what a first generation immigrant goes through and these are the sacrifices that she has made for you. I think immigrants sacrifice everything, their education, their degrees, their wealth, their friends, their family for their children and their future and that is something that we, as the children, need to value.

On the other hand, we also have the right to live our own lives. I think that that is essential, to make our own decisions. I think that at the basis of what we choose needs to be love, so that we love and respect each other and love and respect the other generation. In the end, I do believe your life is your own. It is your right to live your life as you see fit and sometimes, that means making decisions that someone you love won't agree with. I think in my own life, I've had to do that as well. I try to make sure I'm making the right decision, a good decision, not a stupid decision (laughs). I try to avoid those, but if I'm doing the best I can, that's really all I can do.

Sarika: Yeah. It's a struggle for all of us who are children of immigrants. I will definitely attest to that (laughs).
Switching gears a little bit, you actually live in Holland (laughs). You've made a very long trek to Portland, and we greatly appreciate it! First, what brought you there as your second immigration?

Jean: Right. I know. It's as if one immigration experience was not enough ...

Sarika: (Laughs)

Jean: ... I have to have a second one. No. Basically, what happened was I met a guy. I met a Dutch guy; we fell in love. Just practically, I was a writer and a teacher, so it was just easier for me to go to Holland than for him to come to the U.S. You make these decisions thinking, "Oh, well. We'll see," but before you know it, you've built up a whole life there. Now, we're married and we have two kids.

Yes, I live in Holland. I grew up in New York, but I live in Holland. I did go through the immigration experience twice. I will say that it was really, it's always difficult. I mean it's always difficult to be an immigrant. What I've learned from being an immigrant is that learning the language is essential and that was the very first thing I did when I moved to Holland was that I made sure I learned Dutch as well and as quickly as I could.

I will say that the first time moving from a non-Western language and culture to a Western one was huge. The second move from the U.S. to Holland was also difficult and filled with misadventures (laughs), but it was much easier. It was just much easier. I had a diploma from Harvard and from Columbia in my suitcase when I moved and that made all the difference.

Yeah, it is ... I mean at this point, I feel comfortable in all the different societies I navigate, but it's taken a lot of time. I've certainly done a lot of things wrong or been shocked that things are done differently here or there. I think the thing I've realized is that even though it is very hard when you have a diverse background because you always have to choose in every situation what you're going to do. That's a great gift as well because then you know there is a choice and that allows you to very consciously choose your own path.

Sarika: Wonderful. I just cannot fathom how you had a life working in sweatshops, having to protect your mother from other issues, living the life you had in that apartment, then going to a private school, and then going to Harvard. Talk about that transition.

Jean: I think when you come from difficult circumstances, what you learn is that if you don't do something to change your life, your life won't change. It's that simple. It's not, maybe in a way I was lucky. It wasn't like I had yuppy parents who were like, "Oh, go practice your piano lessons" that I could rebel against that or something. I did not have that. I didn't have piano lessons. I didn't have any lessons, and it was very clear to me that if I just kind of coasted in my life, I would work in the factory my entire life. I would live in an apartment like the one we lived in my entire life.

The only way that I was going to escape that was by myself and with my own efforts. That made my life very clear, and it was difficult because I get picked up after school by my father. I'd work at the factory until 10 at night, and we wouldn't get home till 11. I was five years old, six years old, seven years old. I mean I was little, and it was tiring. I had homework; I had tests. I had projects; I had all these things I had to do. Did everything on the subway or at the factory during breaks, but I knew.

I knew from very young that school was going to be my way out because that was where I had an ability. That was where I could do it, and it was clear to me that I was the only one who was going to be able to make my life different.

Sarika: What about relating to your peers and your teachers in those settings?

Jean: It was very hard because nobody knew what I had at home. Nobody knew what my life was really like, so I had to lie to kind of get around it or I would do weird things like we would have to hand a diarama. Mine would be (laughs) completely pathetic when I brought it in because there was no glue. There were no markers. There was none of that stuff. It's this kind of constant compensation to hide my situation. It was difficult.

On the other hand, I loved my friends and I loved my teachers. They kind of showed me another world, another way of being, and showed me books, I mean knowledge. I learned so many things and that kind of was a door way that I wanted to step through. That gave me the motivation to do what I needed to do, to work as hard as I needed to work, and to sleep as little (laughs) as I needed to sleep to get everything done so that I could leave that life.

Sarika: One, I mean I guess kind of political question was... your life and the background that you had and we have this other issue that's in the Supreme Court right now which is about affirmative action. Asian Americans are pitted on both sides of this issue for a lot of stereotyped reasons. Do you have any opinions about this?

Jean: I think Asian Americans have been successful, in general, and that's something that is fantastic. I think that you go to a school, maybe a top school and you see a lot of Asians there. People have this idea that, "Oh, gosh. They all have it easy. They're all out. They're all this." It's really not true. I mean I know from having come from a working class background, having worked in a factory and knowing working class Chinatown that for every single successful Asian that we see, there are a hundred that are left behind.

At the factory, for example, you can start working there as a child. I did, and I was not at all the only child there. You work there through your teens until you are a young person and that's your peak of your speed. Then, as you start to slow down, you can keep working there until you're 80. Then, you work there basically, until you die, and there are so many people who stay in that cycle. I think I was really lucky because my ability was in school.

At home, I was actually a disaster. I was just this terrible Chinese daughter because I'm really clumsy and I burn food and a lot of other stuff. I (laughs) just ... I was argumentative and stubbon, so at home I was this disaster. Sometimes I think that if my skills had

been inverted, if I had been good at cooking and cleaning and bad at school, I would probably be working a restaurant somewhere. I would be a dishwasher, a waitress, or something like that. I do think that it is important to provide support for people in need regardless of color.

Sarika: Thank you so much, Jean Kwok, for chatting with me on KBOO.

Jean: Thank you, and I've really so enjoyed being here.

Sarika: That was award-winning author, Jean Kwok, the featured author for this year's PCC Reads initiative. Her debut novel, "Girl in Translation," became a New York Times best-seller among many other accolades. This story is a work of fiction about a girl whose immigrant life became a secret double life. You can keep up with Jean Kwok at her website *jeankwok.com* or find her on Facebook at *facebook.com/JeanKwokAuthor*. This has been "Between the Covers" on KBOO Community Radio. I'm Sarika Mehta. Thanks for listening.