



***Interior Chinatown*, by Charles Yu**
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

When *Interior Chinatown* was announced as the 2020 winner of the prestigious National Book Award, no one was more surprised than Charles Yu, the novel's author. The award ceremony, usually a festive affair held in Manhattan, was streamed virtually last November. Charles Yu, the writer of three previous books, was so certain his unconventional novel would not win that he had not prepared any acceptance remarks.

Interior Chinatown is written as a seven-act screenplay, interspersed with the internal musings of Willis Wu, a bit-part actor. Willis lives above the Golden Palace Chinese restaurant in an SRO (single room occupancy) building "where you can hear at least five dialects being spoken." A TV cop show called "Black and White" is being filmed at the restaurant. Initially, Willis is cast as Generic Asian Man, but he longs for bigger parts on screen and in life.

The lead roles of the "Black and White" cop show respectively are Miles Turner, a handsome African American detective, and Sarah Green, his accomplished and attractive white partner. Minor roles on the show are filled by other SRO residents, including Pretty Asian Hostess, Asian Waiter, and Gambling Den Boss. Willis lands a Special Guest Star part, but the role he strives for is Kung Fu Guy.

Willis's elderly father takes a minor role as Old Asian Man: "A leading man trapped in the body of an extra. He spent decades in this place, the interior Chinatown, taking the work he could get. Gangster, cook, inscrutable, mystical, nonsensical Oriental." He is disappointed that Willis "the son who was born here could be part of the American show, black and white, no part for yellow. The son who got As in every subject, including English, now making a living as Generic Asian Man."

Things begin to look up for Willis when Karen Lee is cast on "Black and White." Their work together on the police show quickly progresses to a budding romance.

Willis's quest to land the Kung Fu Guy role, however, threatens their relationship. As their individual careers advance, Willis and Karen must figure out whether their screen roles or their real lives are more important.

Interior Chinatown is typeset in Courier, the typeface used by script writers. The author's decision to present his satirical tale as a screenplay may seem to some as choosing style over substance. Charles Yu, the son of immigrants from Taiwan, nevertheless, has written a memorable novel about Asian American assimilation, one worthy of the National Book Award.