

KAREN KAO IS THE CHILD OF CHINESE IMMIGRANTS who settled in the US in the 1950s. She is a graduate of Ramona Convent's Class of 1977, Georgetown University Law Center (1981), and Leiden University (1998). She is a poet, short and long form fiction writer, and essayist. Her poems were published in 1980 when Karen was still an undergraduate student. In 2011, she abandoned her law career and returned to her love of writing and the stories she heard as a child of Old Shanghai. Karen holds dual citizenship in the United States and the Netherlands. She is married with two children and lives in Amsterdam. She is fluent in English, Dutch, and not at all in Chinese. She's still working on that. She was recently at Ramona celebrating her 40th Reunion with her classmates.



Photo courtesy of Mauris Bos

Q: When did you first realize that you wanted to be a writer?

A: It was Denny Lee's 9th grade English class. She had us do all sorts of crazy things in class to experience literature in all its fullness. I can distinctly remember putting on a play about *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse with scarves on the classroom floor to represent the river. Her class was where my first (and only) comedy debuted. I mocked all of our teachers at the time...bad bad bad.

Q: Were there any teachers at Ramona who encouraged you to pursue writing? Did Ramona provide an environment that fostered creativity?

A: You would think, with such a start, that the teachers would have squelched me. Far from it. Aside from my music classes in the old building, where I could dream away at a Steinway grand piano in the French Parlor, I think junior year was my best time. Someone had come up with the brilliant idea of a multidisciplinary package that combined English, History, Music and Art spanning the American revolution up to present day. It was the first time I saw connections between what was happening in the world of politics and what writers were talking about on paper.

Q: Tell us about your undergraduate studies at UC Irvine.

A: UCI was my hippie time. I devoured my English classes so quickly that I had a full year left over to freewheel. I took modern dance and calculus. I wrote poetry and even had some of it published.

Q: Was your decision to pursue law based on practicality?

A: Or lack thereof! My "plan" upon graduation was to write poetry on the beaches of France. I was of course cognizant of the fact that I'd need to eat and drink too. So I told my parents that I would train to be a hairdresser. That way, I could cut hair during the day and write at night. Needless to say, this plan did not fly.

A little while ago, I heard Mohsin Hamid speak. He's a wonderful author and a charming speaker. His latest book *Exit West* is about the migrant crisis here in Europe. He, too, went to law school and has no regrets. He said poets and lawyers are the only ones who know that every word matters.

Q: Your life has been full of interesting detours. Please tell us about your three careers, your move to Amsterdam, and your love of sharing stories of Old Shanghai.

A: Career no. 1 was in Washington DC where I had attended law school at Georgetown and went on to work as an attorney in DC, specializing in telecommunications law. Career no. 2 was as a corporate partner for a Dutch law firm where my area of expertise had morphed into cross-border mergers and acquisitions. I am currently in the throes of career no. 3 as a debut author. The latter is just as exciting and challenging to me as any of my former jobs were. I need to get good at what I do and make a name for myself. Same old, same old. But writing is also about being relevant, saying the things that need to be said, and staying true to myself.

Let me say it differently. I am, by nature, a private person. It's difficult for me to express my emotions or to come out and say what I really want. I write about Shanghai, my roots, and the issues faced by women at that time because these are topics that are important to me. But I can't convey that importance unless I can also show you how I feel. Writing is my ultimate challenge.

Q: Our readers are primarily Ramona alumnae. What wisdom can you share with them regarding your life's journey?

A: I had a client once who recommended me on LinkedIn as a "risk-taker." That's an odd way to describe a lawyer, since most of us are pretty risk-averse. But I suppose that, if you look at the circuitous paths I've taken, I've taken a lot of risks. To leave the safety of home for the wilds of Washington, DC or abandon job security for the creative life. To start all over, again and again.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Karen's first novel, *The Dancing Girl and the Turtle* was published by Linen Press on 1 April 2017. It is the story of a woman raped and left for dead on the road to Shanghai 1937. Her struggle has been praised by critics from London to Hong Kong for its sensitive portrayal of violence against women and the damage silence can do.