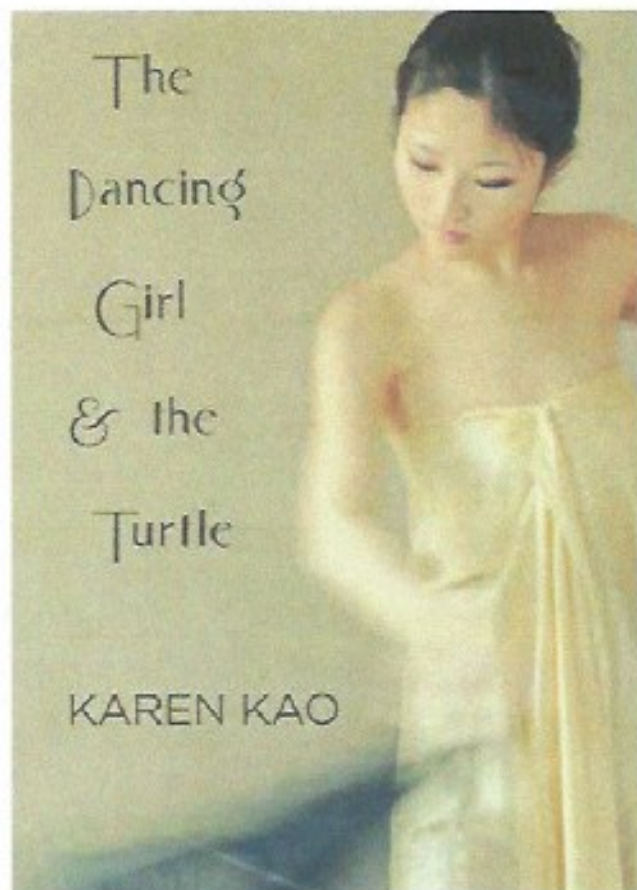


AUTHORS

Life after Law: Karen Kao (L'84)



Karen Kao (L'84) spent more than 25 years practicing law — primarily cross-border M&A as a law firm partner in The Netherlands — before turning to full-time fiction writing in 2011. Her debut novel, *The Dancing Girl and the Turtle*, was published by Linen Press in London and Amsterdam last April; it is available on amazon.com.

As an undergraduate at the University of California, you were an aspiring poet. Who were some of your favorite poets?

Poetry to me is emotions onto paper. It's bleeding. Ai Ogawa is someone who does that. Tess Gallagher was a poet who wrote a lot about Orange County, which is where I went to college.

Charles Wright, who later became the poet laureate of the United States, was one of my teachers and one of the most wonderful people that you could imagine. I became friends with Yusef Komunyakaa, who was the first person to publish my poetry and who eventually got a Pulitzer for his own amazing work. So I was at a really good place at a really good time.

Why law school?

My plan after college was to go write poetry on the beaches of France — until my dad talked me into applying for law school. I only applied to two, Harvard and Georgetown Law, and once you get in, you have to go. Later, when I asked Charles Wright for career advice, he said, being a poet is such a hard life. Unless you

Book cover, courtesy of Linen Press. Childhood photos provided by Karen Kao.

cannot wake up in the morning and you cannot go to sleep at night without writing poetry, do something else.

How did you end up doing cross-border M&A in Amsterdam?

I met my husband [who is Dutch] during law school at a party — he was not a law student but had finished his master's at Columbia. I started out doing communications law in Washington, D.C., in the early 1980s, when everybody wanted to buy a piece of a telecom company. That allowed me to do mergers and acquisitions from the regulatory perspective — which is the best side to be on, since you can advise on deal structure and control and satisfying the FCC.

And it turned out to be a godsend because when we moved from D.C. to Amsterdam, it was the one marketable skill that I had that translated. It was good timing as well because the Dutch civil code had just been completely overhauled. So I only had to learn the code once. But in order to really practice law here, I had to get a Dutch law degree. I got a paralegal position, worked during the day and went to law school at night until I graduated. I switched to a firm in Amsterdam in 1999.

As a law firm partner doing cross-border M&A, and the head of a corporate law department in The Netherlands, you were often the only woman in the room. What advice would you give to young women attorneys in under-represented fields?

Do your job. Don't get upset about being the only woman in the room. Put your energy into being the best lawyer you can be.

How did you transition to being a full-time fiction writer?

When I decided that I was going to quit,

back in 2011, I started talking to clients. I said, I'm looking for a change and I want to know, how did you get where you are today? I got a tremendous amount of help. I walked in a lot of shoes but when it came down to making a choice, writing was really the one thing that made me happy. I did some consulting for a while but it felt an awful lot like my old law practice. I thought, if I'm going to quit, I better go all the way.

Of course, the first thing any sane person would ask is: aren't you scared about your money running out? And it's true: taking a really long and hard look at your financial situation is key in order to make a step like this. Even then, you have to retrench, you have to cut back. You have to think: what do I really need? For example, I don't have anywhere near the same shoe collection that I used to have.

But I think the real hurdle for most people is the ego thing. You have to be willing to start over again and to be bad at

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whatever it is that you're trying. For most people my age who have had any measure of success, it's really hard to go back.

Your debut novel, *The Dancing Girl and the Turtle*, was published in April. What was the inspiration for the book? How did you describe it when pitching it to publishers?

The inspiration for my book is actually my father, who grew up in Shanghai. He would tell me stories about his life and about family legends. I guess I stored the information somewhere in the back of my mind, because when I started writing again, I found myself focusing primarily on those old stories.

My publisher, Linen Press, bought the manuscript because my novel explores violence against women. There is more violence in women's lives than we would like to admit, and that story needs to be told.

The novel is about a woman in Shanghai who is raped at the very beginning of the novel. It's told from her perspective, that of her amah and the other house servants and the cousin who falls in love with her. Very different characters — a kind of Upstairs, Downstairs Shanghai-style — in order to create a kaleidoscopic view of what life in Shanghai in 1937 would have felt like.

How does being a lawyer help you as a writer? There is the life experience, certainly, but does it help you when structuring a plot?

Lawyers are always thinking ahead — got to have a contingency plan. You're used to thinking, if I do A, what is the B step going to be?

Then there are the language skills we have to learn. A lot about being a lawyer is being clear, conveying your points. Doing that in purple prose doesn't usually work.

You are using your language to convince. And that's kind of what a writer does. I need to captivate you with my language in sort of the same way that you try to captivate the other side when you are negotiating.

What would you say to lawyers who still have a different dream inside them?

I think that what holds people back the most is fear. We lawyers in particular are a risk-averse tribe. When I decided to leave my firm and went around to tell each of the partners personally, by and large the response was very positive: that's great and that's courageous, and it's really wonderful that you're willing to make a leap. But there were a handful of people who said, God, I wish I could do that.

It's not that hard. You can use your skill set as a lawyer in unsuspecting ways. You're not starting over completely. You still bring the benefit of your life experience and to some extent some work skills into whatever it is that you end up doing. Just go for it.

You can follow Karen Kao on her blog at inkstonepress.com.

SUPREME COURT

2017 Supreme Court Swearing-In Ceremony



The Supreme Court swearing-in ceremony is a much-anticipated annual event sponsored by Georgetown Law's Office of Alumni Affairs for alumni who become members of the Supreme Court Bar. The following alumni took part in this year's ceremony on June 19.

Frances Chang (L'07)
Lawrence N. Daniels (L'82)
Timothy B. Pistell (L'12)
Thomas W. Fahey (L'72)
Angelo I. Amador (L'05)
George C. Chipev (F'09, L'12)
Angelique P. Dorsey (L'97)
Rowan M. Dougherty (L'07)
Marian G. Fowler (L'07)
Daniel S. Harawa (L'12)
Michael L. Huang (L'07)

Randel K. Johnson (L'84)
Jennifer McVey Thomas (L'07)
Leah J. Tulin (L'07)
Robert E. Vagley (L'77)
Karen McDonald Lopez (L'82)
Gregory S. Lisi (L'92)
Richard J. Ramsay (L'07)
Bradley N. Kehr (L'12)
Gary A. Ritter (L'82)
John P. Morgan III (L'16)

Photo by Bill Petros