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## MONKEY KING

By Patricia Chao

HarperCollins. 320 pp.

"The first duty of love," advised Paul Tillich, "is to listen."

But those closest to Sally Wang, narrator of Patricia Chao's compelling debut novel, don't want to hear what Sally needs to say: that for two decades she has been haunted by images of her father's late-night visits to her bedroom to sexually molest her.

Her younger sister Marty, who witnessed the abuse and whose coquettish appeal enables her to live off men, seems perversely envious that their father was attracted to the plainer Sally: "I never understood why Daddy had a thing about you anyway," Marty says, "you're not even that pretty."

Her devoted Shanghai-born mother, an instructor at Yale, has several reasons to deny Sally's nightmare, which reflects maternal failure both as parent and wife.

Sally seems unpersuaded by her mother's injunction, "Your father is dead. He is an ancestor. You must have respect for your ancestors." Her mother's Chinese moral structure has not taken root in her California-born daughters.

But neither have Sally's roots fixed in American soil. Strolling in Manhattan's Chinatown, she observes, "Since it was Saturday there were lots of tourists mixed among the natives and as always I felt displaced, not being either."

The Chinese immigrant experience--crossing the Pacific, not Atlantic; gazing east, not west, toward the frontier--has always run against America's mythic grain. And Sally is doubly lost.

So, unable to communicate with anyone, feeling little connection to the world around her, Sally starts longing for death: "My heart was swollen for it," she says. "It lay down with me in bed and seeped into my pores while I slept."

At 27, the Manhattan art director tries to end her life. When we first see Sally, she has just been admitted to Willowridge, a mental hospital, about to start rebuilding the fragments of her personality into an integrated whole.

Lacking confidence in her inner resources, Sally looks outward for definition. Toward that end, Chao masterfully braids Sally's interactions with other patients and a steady assemblage of her jigsaw memories of family life.

Among the patients is the young sexual predator Douglas who "would have been an attractive guy if it weren't for his personality."

Her nurturing roommate Lilith makes less frightening but equally unwelcome sexual advances and deteriorates before Sally's eyes: "Watching her, it hit me again how scarily thin she was... at the mercy of something bigger than herself, becoming more and more brittle under its force."

Most attractive is Mel, 19, given to fist fights but protectively benevolent toward Sally. After both are released from Willowridge, Mel will provide a steady foothold on which Sally can take an important step forward.

But it will be no easy road, for Sally personifies the dominant theme of modern American literature: the human personality adrift in an alienated world, rootless, estranged from earlier sources of meaning.

She treasures her grandmother Nai-nai's jade hairpin but otherwise feels disassociated from a Chinese past that devalues her. She constantly hears her father's disdain: "USELESS GIRL. WALKING PIECE OF MEAT," harsher even than T'ang dynasty poet Po Chu-i's paternal appraisal of his daughter: "Not a son, but still better than nothing."

Her father constantly reminded her she was not American either. He taped to their refrigerator a picture of a black boy captioned "He hasn't got a Chinaman's chance." "That's what Americans think of us," he snarled. "In your heart you are Chinese."

There's another key source of Sally's inner chaos. An artist, she had once used painting to "numb the monster inside me," the monster who wanted to murder her father. But gradually she'd lost the artist's ability to "tap into the soul." With no outer point of focus, the inner world can come apart, and vice versa.

With these key areas of her life--intimacy, identity and work--all inadequate or in crisis, there can be no quick or simple path back to wholeness. And Chao shows sophisticated restraint in not trying to provide one, just the honest two steps forward, one back, one sideways typical of psychic progress.

While her novel swells with the self-discovery reflection frequent in first novels, it never degenerates into self-pity.

And clearly, *Monkey King* marks the debut of a gifted stylist with a penetrating eye for detail. As Sally rides to Willowridge, her painter's eye catches "the trees along the highway--maples with their massive trunks and dark snaky lower limbs, fatalistic lean oaks, spears of birches angling whitely and every which way against the lightning sky."

Her sensual acuity helps capture the dissociation of mental breakdown; when Sally eats hospital eggplant, "The taste was odd, not wrong, but like it was coming from far away."

It also brings to life a warm segment during which Sally visits a childless aunt and uncle in St. Petersburg, Fla. who treat her like a daughter under "that Florida light, with its peculiar empty quality, as if it were reflecting only ocean, like at the beginning of time."

Chao gilds description with an air of metaphor, as when Sally describes a cat's death: "I'm picturing Lili at the edge of the road, waiting to cross, but the cars won't stop coming, so she finally runs out anyway. It's the only way she knows to get home."

There are minor flaws--slight factual inaccuracies in the Florida section, an obtrusive compulsion to make each chapter's final sentence sound like an ending--and future work must clarify whether Chao has large-hearted empathy or only keen self-awareness. But this accomplished first novel boldly reveals a talent well worth watching.