

## *Everything I Learned, I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant* Transcript

Welcome to Reading the Rainbow, brought to you by the Dauphin County Library System. For the book curious looking for their next good LGBTQ+ read. Listen in as queer library staff discuss the Own Voice stories they've been reading.



Annika: I'm Annika, she/her, or any pronoun is fine for me.

Ann: I'm Ann, she/her, they/them.

Curtis: I'm Curtis, he/him.

Annika: So today is a bit of a treat as we have Curtis Chin here with us to discuss his forthcoming book: *Everything I Learned I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant*. Curtis Chin is a co-founder of the Asian American Writers Workshop in New York City. He has served as the nonprofit's first executive director. He went on to write for network and cable television before transitioning into social justice documentaries. Chin has screened his films at over 600 venues in 20 countries. He has written for CNN, Bon Appetit, the Detroit Free Press, and the Emancipator for Boston Globe. A graduate of the University of Michigan, Chin has received awards from ABC, Disney Television, New York Foundation for the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, and more. His memoir, *Everything I Learned I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant*, will be published by Little Brown in Fall 2023. It will be released on October 17th.

Ann: So a little bit about *Everything I Learned I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant*: 1980s Detroit was a volatile place to live, but above the fray stood a safe haven: Chung's Cantonese Cuisine, where anyone—from the city's first Black mayor to the local drag queens, from a big-time Hollywood star to elderly Jewish couples—could sit down for a warm, home-cooked meal. Here was where, beneath a bright red awning and surrounded by his multigenerational family, filmmaker and activist Curtis Chin came of age; where he learned to embrace his identity as a gay ABC, or American-born Chinese; where he navigated the divided city's spiraling misfortunes; and where—between helpings of almond boneless chicken, sweet-and-sour pork, and some of his own less savory culinary concoctions—he realized just how much he had to offer to the world, to his beloved family, and to himself.

Annika: Welcome.

Curtis: Thank you. So excited to be here.

Annika: And we're so excited to have you. So let's get right into what we're here for, to learn more about you and your book. So first question is, well, more of a statement first. Reading this book made me extremely hungry. Is there anything that you still cook or seek out that particularly reminds you of your family?

Curtis: First of all, mission accomplished. You know, the book is set in a Chinese restaurant, but one of the jokes is, you know, that I wasn't a very good cook. And so I would have to say at this point, I'm very glad that I live very close to Chinatown. I can run out and get good Chinese food.

Annika: Do you know of some more interesting combinations?

Curtis: Well, there's a pressure from people because, as I said in the book, the restaurant that I grew up in was based in Detroit, and it was founded by my great grandfather in 1940. And it really was legendary in Detroit. I think I mentioned at some point in the 60 years that we owned the place, we sold over 10 million egg rolls. It was a really popular restaurant. And so all these people back in Detroit who heard that my book is coming out are now asking me, oh, are you going to revive the

restaurant? Are you going to bring back some of those dishes I can't get anymore? Like I've been hankering for it, you know, for decades because we closed the restaurant over, you know, a long time ago. So, yeah, sadly, I may have to disappoint all these people and say, nope, just a book, no egg rolls.

Ann: I love the image of the Chinese restaurant as a place where all are welcome, each for our own reasons. What unique flavors would you like readers to look for in your memoir? Spicy, sweet, bitter?

Curtis: Well, I mean, that's why I thought the restaurant was a perfect setting, you know, for a book, not only because I grew up in one, but because even to this day, I feel like whenever you go into a Chinese restaurant, you can meet so many different people, right? Different races, different class backgrounds, different religions. And I just thought, given the way our country is right now, very divided, where people don't talk to each other, maybe we can use things where we do have some commonality or some connection. You know, food is oftentimes one of those things. Maybe we can use those things to maybe bring ourselves together and maybe have these difficult conversations, not to avoid the hard subjects, but at least to do it in a friendlier setting. So I would say that the emotion or the thing that I want people to come out of, maybe not taste, but emotion is comfort, you know, because I feel like that's what Chinese food is to me anyway.

Annika: I think you definitely got that vibe down.

Ann: Yeah, definitely. And adding to that, do you have any practical tips if we're at a Chinese restaurant? Like, we should definitely have this, maybe don't have that. Any recommendations?

Curtis: No, because every Chinese restaurant is different, right? I mean, like everybody has their specialty. You know, some people like to order the most popular dishes. Some people like to order things off what's called the secret menu that's not on the menu. Yeah, it's hard for me to say. I don't have any recommendations. I know what I like to eat or just be prepared to bring leftovers. That's one of the things my parents always told us growing up is better to leave with leftovers than to leave hungry. That's what I would say is, like, go for it. Order that extra dish if you want. It's just as good the next day.

Annika: So how did you choose what to include? Was there anything that you wished you could have left in that ended up cut?

Curtis: Yeah, so, you know, the writing process is hard when you're writing a memoir, right? Because you've lived this whole life. How do you know what are the important moments to include, right? I mean, when I first started writing this book, I was writing a different book than actually what got published. I was writing a book that was just about my crazy Chinese family, and I thought it was just going to be a family memoir, right? To start the writing process, I wrote myself an email with a couple dozen stories, right, that I thought would definitely make it in, like the funniest stories that I had growing up, like my grandma boiling our pets to eat for dinner, or my grandfather running, you know, the Chinese mafia. But the majority of those stories actually didn't make it in, because it seemed like the book that people wanted to read these days had more to do with racial identity, coming out, you know, more identity issues and intersectionality, because I feel like that's what our country is grappling with. So maybe a lighthearted family comedy wasn't exactly, you know, the thing that was selling. It's still in there, because that's who I am. That's what I like to write about. But I feel like I've had to balance it with some of the more difficult things. In some ways, it made the book a little bit more difficult to write about, because it gets into more painful territories and things that you don't necessarily want to pick apart. But in the end, hopefully that makes it a better book, right? I hope I answered your question.

Annika: Yes.

Ann: Yeah, no, yeah, I got that. I felt like especially at the end, it got really, it got more upbeat and funny, and I really liked that. It was a really good lead out, you know, it was like...

Curtis: Well, one thing I did say to my agents is that, you know, so there are 24 stories in this book, you know, eight stories in middle school, eight in high school, eight in college, because 8-8-8 is good luck to Chinese people. But there's 20 stories that I wrote that didn't make it in the book. So I said, if this book does really well, can you help me sell a book called Leftovers?

(Laughter)

Annika: Ah, yes. That's awesome.

Curtis: For the stories that didn't make it in.

Ann: Well, now, there was a lot of trauma in your book. There were a lot of traumatic experiences. How did it feel to relive some of those moments? Was it hard or was it healing?

Curtis: So I grew up in Detroit during the 80s, which was a very difficult time for the city, not just in terms of auto layoffs, crime, crack, AIDS. I personally knew five people murdered by the time I was 18 years old. But it's weird that you use the word trauma to me because I think I grew up fine. I don't feel traumatized. I don't feel like, and maybe that's the thing is that kids sort of adapt to the surroundings they have. And so to me, that just seemed normal that, like, every few years, someone would die tragically. I don't know. I mean, so, or maybe I'm just a psychopath. I don't really know, but I think I'm okay. And maybe that's the point of the book is that despite all this craziness going on around me and my siblings, my parents were able to provide us with this really wonderful childhood, right, this safe environment, even though we're in this inner city, the most difficult crime-ridden area of the city, the red-light district in Detroit. I mean, it doesn't get tougher than that, right? Despite all that, I feel like we had a really safe, great childhood thanks to my parents.

Ann: Thank you.

Annika: What was the hardest part about writing your book and the most rewarding?

Curtis: The hardest part is reliving my parents' relationship because it was difficult. And to some degree, even now when I talk about or even think about some of those scenes, I still cry because those are really difficult times, you know, growing up. But I think that you have to do that because that's what a memoir is about, right? It's reliving the good and the bad. Like I said, when I first started writing, I thought it was just a humor book. But now I understand the value of writing something that is humorous but also can be, you know, what would the term be? I don't want to say tragic. What's the opposite of humorous? Serious?

Annika: I mean, literally tragedy because comedy tragedy. But, yeah.

Curtis: Yeah, yeah.

Annika: I mean, the word healing.

Curtis: Yeah. Yeah. But I do think that, in the end, that makes for a better book. Even if it does make things a little bit more uncomfortable, I feel like the reader will get more out of it by understanding the fuller picture.

Ann: The COVID-19 pandemic led to many changes relevant to your story, including the loss of many small businesses and the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment in the U.S. Did the pandemic impact your decision to write this memoir? And if so, how?

Curtis: That's a great question. I think that actually is connected to what I said before, is that when I first started writing this, it was a family memoir, just a humor memoir. I had a very difficult time

selling the book, even finding an agent. But it was only after COVID happened and the country shut down, but also, more importantly, George Floyd was murdered. And those things sort of happened around the same time. And so I was stuck at home in L.A. I couldn't go out and do my day job, which is filming, making documentaries. And so I said, okay, I'm going to focus really on the book. And I started looking at what other people were writing and reading. And it really seemed like people wanted to have these deeper conversations in our country about racial identity. So that sort of shifted my book's focus. It's been smooth sailing after that. I've had four offers of representations from agents after spending several years and getting 90 rejection letters. Now I was getting multiple offers. The book sold in an auction with multiple houses competing for it. And like I said, Publishers Weekly just named it, well, they named it one of the top 10 memoirs for the fall. Goodreads just had it on their list of top 55 books that their readers are anticipating for the fall. And so, there's starting to be some buzz and also some interest from the national media. I won't mention which network shows, but yeah, they're expressing interest in it. So that's all good.

Annika: Fabulous.

Ann: Very deserved.

Annika: So what was your family's reaction to your memoir?

Curtis: They haven't read it yet.

Annika: Okay.

Curtis: We'll see. Well, I've told them and I've had to warn them about things. So yeah. Oh, the one story I do share is that I was, because I've been doing what's called a pre-launch. I've been actually going out in advance of the book coming out and already starting to talk about the book and trying to drum up support. And I was in Austin, Texas in the spring. And the people there, the organizers of that event, wanted to have lunch with me on the day I was leaving. And they said, oh, come on down. You know, we'll go have a brunch or something. And so I called an Uber and I went downstairs to the street to wait for the car to show up. And when I get down there, there's an old Chinese woman just standing outside on the corner. And she turns around and she sees my sweatshirt. It says Detroit versus everybody. And she's like, oh, are you from Detroit? And I said, yeah. And she's like, and we find out that she, her mom was actually best friends with my grandmother. Right. She started sharing all these stories about my grandmother. And I apologized to her. I said, well, I hate to tell you this, but my grandmother doesn't come off so well in my book because she was kind of mean to us. And this woman was adamant that, no, your grandmother was the nicest person, she taught us how to drink coffee and she gave us cookies all the time. And I said, I completely accept the fact that you, you had great memories of my grandmother, you know, and that she could be nice to you, but she wasn't nice to me. Right? And then you can have these different memories of people. And it occurred to me a few days later that that was my grandmother sending an emissary from the grave saying that like, you totally are like, you know, lying about me, trying to make me look really bad. And so regardless of how you write your family, they're not going to like it. And even if they're dead, they're going to come out and tell you. So you can't win. You just have to be honest with them and say, well, this is my memory. This is my perspective. And yes, I am going to be the good guy in this book because it's my book.

Annika: Exactly.

Curtis: You know, that's just the way it goes.

Ann: What is your favorite moment from the book? No spoilers, but maybe a section readers can look forward to when they get there.

Curtis: The one that gives me the most joy when I think about it is one of the cooks that I had a crush on. I still have the hots for him. Even after all these decades later, that still brings me joy.

Annika: So you do mention that your dad may have accidentally set you up on your first gay blind date. It's such a tantalizing tidbit to just sit down and leave there. Do you mind telling us about that?

Curtis: Yeah, that's one of the stories that didn't make it into the book was that, you know, when I wanted to pursue publishing, one of the things about my dad was that he was really great about trying to introduce us to people. This is an anecdote that I like to share outside is that some people will ask me, given the title of your book, *Everything I learned, I learned in a Chinese Restaurant*, what's the one thing that you think that you learned most importantly? And I would always say that, you know, when you're growing up, a lot of your, a lot of the parents will tell kids don't talk to strangers, right? My parents had the exact opposite, you know, advice. They were like, talk to strangers. And who they were talking about were the people sitting in our dining room, because my mom didn't graduate high school. My dad went to community college for maybe two semesters. So they didn't really know what kind of job opportunities existed for us outside those four walls of that Chinese restaurant, but they knew that we had a dining room full of people that actually did and who could tell us things. And so anytime my dad met somebody who had an interesting job or something, he'd call us all over and all six of us would run over and we'd barrage these people with questions like, well, what do you do in your job? How much do you get paid? You know, do you like what you do? And that was sort of like, you know, our exposure to the world outside. And so, when I went off to college and I started studying creative writing, my dad had met this guy who was a publisher in Detroit and those don't happen very often, right? And so my dad got all excited. And so he's like, okay, I'm going to set you up with this guy. He's going to come out and meet you. He's going to be in Ann Arbor. And so I met up with this guy. And yeah, it was. Yeah. In my opinion, I think it was the date. It was very clear early on. Yeah.

Ann: Gay rights have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. Do you have any messages you'd like to pass on to LGBT+ youth?

Curtis: Well, that's the interesting thing to me, because, you know, when I was writing this book, I didn't know who would be interested in the book. I mean, when you think about the LGBT—community in the writing of it, I did feel like I was speaking more to people my age because I feel like I'm part of that generation that survived AIDS. I mean, I was sort of at the tail end of that a little bit, but I was still part of that, you know, with ACT UP, Queer Nation and all those things eventually. And so I felt like I was talking to those people because I felt like they could really relate to the fear that we had back then and the sense of reduced life expectancy. I mean, I grew up as a kid thinking I'd be dead by the age of 30. I really did. Whether it was the crime happening in Detroit, you know, or whether it was AIDS, something was going to kill me. And so that's who I was writing to. But I think that given the political climate that we're living in these days and the anti-trans and rollback that the right is trying to do, including, I think, probably trying to go after marriage equality, I think a lot of young people have been interested in the book. I've been having people saying, kind of in a weird way, like, what was it like to live back in the old days? Do you know what I mean? But that's okay because I am older. I'll accept that. And I wear that as a badge of honor. But it's interesting that they're curious because I think that as they're going through these political pushback, they're understanding that the civil rights fight in our community has been a long, ongoing thing and that this is just a setback, a temporary setback, right, a pushback from all the gains that we've made because a lot of these young people have grown up in a— I mean, all of them have grown up in a far more different world where LGBT rights made so much progress, whether it's marriage equality, whether it's being able to see themselves in the media, et cetera, et cetera. And so maybe it's a good reminder for them that there was a fight to get to that point, that they have been able to do the things. So I hope that the book is appealing to young people, you know, but I'll be honest with you, my heart is also reaching out to the people that are from my generation who survived.

Ann: Thank you.

Annika: That makes a lot of sense because I felt a lot of parallels when I was reading it. I remember all of this. It's so funny because my son is 16 and he's gay and he's never gone through any of that, and that's amazing. It's so good that things have changed that much.

Curtis: Yeah. I mean, so I've thought about that. I was like, is it good that the young people don't know about the struggle in the past because they've gotten the chance to live the lives that hopefully we, you know, should have gotten to?

Annika: Exactly.

Curtis: But I think that you can have it both. It's good that they're not burdened by that, but it's also good that they're armed with that information.

Annika: Absolutely. So you clearly love your hometown of Detroit. I mean, it's even within your URL. I see from your blog that the last of the historic buildings in Chinatown has been demolished, but I also noticed recently the James Scott Mansion has been renovated. What are your feelings on the area you grew up in?

Curtis: Well, I think that this is a general discussion just about the inner city and about like our history as communities, particularly marginalized communities. You know, oftentimes our history is erased for whatever reason. I mean, whether you're talking about what's happening in Florida right now, but people like to rewrite things and sort of we're always the last to decide these things. And so I think that it's important for us to have more agency and capacity to sort of reclaim our history and to make sure that we can pass it on because these places are really important to us. When they destroy a building that was built in the late 1800s, which was the community center for the Chinese American community, how can you just destroy that building without even having a conversation with the community? Because the community was asking for a delay of 30 days just to discuss and to make a case as to why this was historically important. But the building owners didn't even want to wait that long and they destroyed it over the weekend. And the sad part is we've since spoken to them and we've asked them, well, what are your plans for that property? And they said, we don't have any plans.

Annika: That's awful.

Curtis: Yeah, we just, it's an older building. It's potentially a health hazard, a safety hazard, so, you know, we wanted to tear it down. Mind you, this is a building that these property owners have owned for over a decade. They're the ones who let that building fall into disrepair. They're the ones, when they bought it, they should have at least done some basic maintenance so that it didn't get to that point where the city said they had to, you know, tear it down. And so, yeah. And that was all politics because, again, the city council voted unanimously in Detroit not to tear down the building. They said, let's do this study. Let's see if there's a historical— a case for this to be named as a historical building in Detroit. And if you know anything about Detroit, you know that they've been tearing down so many of the iconic buildings and it's almost unrecognizable in some ways. And I think that is a little bit sad. I'm not someone who wants to dwell— Well, it's kind of weird to say this because I just wrote a memoir, but I'm not someone who necessarily dwells in the past, you know what I mean, and stuff. But I do think it's important to acknowledge and to at least question and ask what role does history and the past play in moving forward?

Ann: And what are you reading or what would you recommend?

Curtis: I hate to admit this, but I'm not a very big reader. I mean, as I say, I grew up in a Chinese restaurant. We rarely had books. I mean, you know, I said we had two types of books that the customers left behind. One were the Harlequin romances and the other one was the Bible. And I was like, as a closeted gay Asian, I wasn't interested in either one of those. So I just didn't have a history. So I read a lot more newspapers and things like that eventually. You know, I'm doing a lot of research

right now because I'm doing a podcast for America's Test Kitchen, looking at one of the dishes in the book, the almond boneless chicken dish. So I am doing research now into the origins of it. So I'm reading nonfiction books about chop suey joints and the start of Chinese restaurants in America.

Ann: Interesting.

Annika: What are you working on now? I know you've mentioned a couple of things.

Curtis: So right now I am working on a podcast for America's Test Kitchen, which has been... I signed up for it because I love the idea and I really want to work on it. But then I look at my schedule and then I'm like, oh, shoot, why did I agree to this? Because the main thing I'm working on really is the book launch, right? Preparing and organizing all of that. I also have a couple other TV projects which have been stalled because of the Writers Guild strikeout here. But I can still make tweaks on these things myself outside. And then also a documentary that I made last year is in negotiations with PBS. So I have to do a little bit of editing on that. So, yeah.

Annika: Nice. Alright. So anything else you'd like to add for our listeners?

Curtis: You know, I hope that they'll read the book with an open mind. And I think that when people pick up the book, they might think that they're just learning about a Chinese-American family in Detroit. But I hope that they will take a step back and think that they're also learning about America and bigger issues in it, in a particular time period, the 80s, in our country. Because I do think that's when our country sort of made a turn towards this, where we are right now, in a very fractious state. I think that you can sort of see the seeds of all that during that time period, the 80s.

Annika: Well, thank you so much for being with us. I personally enjoyed talking with you. And I hope you great success.

Curtis: Thank you.

Annika: The book is very engaging, and I really enjoyed reading it. Just, like, anybody else who reads it in the future just needs to have some snacks on hand.

Curtis: Hopefully, you guys are ordering copies for your library.

Annika: Oh, yes, absolutely.

Curtis: Oh, good!

Annika: We have one right now. [inaudible]

Curtis: Awesome. Thank you.

Ann: Thank you so much.

Curtis: Appreciate your support. Okay. Good luck with everything. And let me know when you post up the podcast, okay? I'll put a link to my website.

Annika: Alright.

Annika: It'll probably be around September.

Curtis: Oh, perfect. Yeah, the book comes out October 17th, so it'll be perfect. Okay, thanks!



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