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REVIEW

Half brothers finally meet -- in love triangle

Julie Foster
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Brothers

By Da Chen

SHAYE AREHEART/CROWN; 432 Pages; \$25

If, as the Chinese believe, your name dictates your fate, author Da Chen has literarily made the grade. But it could have been different.

In his 1999 memoir, "Colors of the Mountains," Chen noted that 1962, the year of his birth, was the Year of Great Starvation. When Soviet demands for repayment of loans prompted Chairman Mao to command that everyone become "hungry heroes" by eating less, and severe drought created shortages, famine ensued. Chen's father, in too literal a mood, proposed naming his son after prevailing weather conditions but wisely reconsidered.

"Dad wanted to give me the name Han, which means drought. But that would have been like naming a boy in Hiroshima Atom Bomb. ... So Dad named me Da, which means prosperity."

As the author of two well-received memoirs plus a kung fu novel, "Wandering Warrior," and an autobiography, "China's Son," both written for young adults, Chen proves in his fifth book that he is flourishing in the world of belles lettres.

"Brothers" took almost a decade to complete. It is, according to Chen, a tribute to his father, whose life was drastically altered by political events. Chen's father and his brother were sons of wealthy landowners in the southern province of Fujian. Both sons were in Taiwan building schools and together returned home to be married.

Chen's uncle returned to Taiwan after the ceremony. But Chen's father had been asked to stay and help with family business. During that week Communist Red Army troops entered the village, erected the Iron Curtain and precipitated the family's economic decline and political persecution. The brothers were separated for 35 years.

"Brothers" is set between 1960 and 1998. The story follows the lives of two half brothers fathered by an influential general during the Cultural Revolution. Tan, born to the general's wife, grows up surrounded by power and privilege. The second son, Shento, born to the general's mistress, faces a life of hardship and trial. They remain unaware of the other's existence until falling in love with the same woman. Their lives finally converge in Tiananmen Square.

The story begins in Balan, southwest China, with Shento describing the unusual circumstances of his birth. In the second chapter Chen switches narrators. He introduces Tan, who provides a description of his upper-class birth and family background. He follows this construction throughout the novel, alternating chapters, each giving a

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different perspective of the turbulent events and political strife in China. Only after 100-plus pages does Chen begin devoting chapters to Sumi, the beautiful author both men love.

Love is just one in the cornucopia of motives and emotions Chen explores. Revenge, lust, greed and their consequences are all examined. Assassinations, torture and sex all make appearances. Readers may cringe at the precise language.

" 'In the old days, we'd have made you a eunuch. But we'll try something new.' The hairy man held me from behind. Another man introduced himself as the doctor. He bent over and grabbed my penis. In his right hand, he held a piece of sharp wire."

Chen offers readers tantalizing peeks on how major political events in China may have transpired. "Before sunrise, six masked and heavily armed men raided both the chamber of Madame Mao, who was found sleeping without her wig under the same quilt as a handsome married ballet dancer, and the residence of the commander in chief of China's Garrison Force, Major General Wan Dong Xing. No gunfire heard, no bloodshed. Even though it was the turning point in a major chapter in my country's history, no footnote would ever be found about the incidents."

As enticing a subject as political upheaval is to write about, what Chen enjoys is pitting each of his characters against fate and letting it play out on the page. "Brothers" takes readers on a fantastic magic carpet ride around the globe. And Chen's fate is no less amazing. In 1984, at the age of 23, Chen was teaching English in Beijing and trying to get out of China when he was offered a fellowship to attend a small college in the United States. For several years he taught Chinese history, art and language. Chen went on to graduate from Columbia University School of Law. He now lives in New York's Hudson Valley with his wife and children.

And though Chen believes his father embraced a "fatalist and doggedly defiant view" of life, in "Brothers" he's crafted a story of hope, redemption and destiny fulfilled.

Julie Foster is a writer in Sacramento.

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