



**Thanh, Yasuko. (2019). Mistakes to Run With: A Memoir. Toronto: Hamish Hamilton.**

Reviewed by: Alicia Lin, MacEwan University

Yasuko Thanh's memoir, "Mistakes to Run With", is an extensive and heart-rending recollection of Thanh's journey of a life of survival from running away from home and prostituting on the streets of Vancouver at the age of fifteen to winning the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize for her debut novel in her forties. Through her memoir, Thanh takes us through her journey of self-actualization, finding solace in her writing, her search for acceptance that stemmed from the inherent loneliness she went through as a child, and the profound impact this all had on her mental health.

Thanh's childhood upbringing is similar to many immigrant parents; their children (firstborns especially) are constantly expected to receive top grades in school on top of extracurricular activities. Like many other children of immigrants, Thanh's top grades in school and other achievements were never good enough nor acknowledged by her parents, while her younger brother was coddled and considered the golden child. The constant pressure mingled with no recognition from her parents began to manifest in signs of borderline personality disorder when Thanh was a teenager, which has led to her destructive behaviour, causing her to drop out of school and live on the streets.

Thanh's recollection of her life is both shocking and graphic. Living rough since she was fifteen, Thanh found refuge wherever and whoever would take her. Her friend group consisted of

bikers, drug addicts, pimps and other prostitutes. Selling her body for money, she would do whatever she could to receive the love and acceptance Thanh craved when she was younger. In the memoir, she even acknowledges that she was "obsessed with love and being lovable" that stemmed from "[a]n obsession rooted in childhood" (p. 125). Living on the streets, Thanh knew it was a challenge just to survive to see the next day, risking getting beat, raped or face death from her 'dates' so that she can give her earnings to her pimp in a vain attempt to earn his love. One of the pimps she had a relationship with was Jay, whom Thanh thought "belonged" to her (p. 89). Thanh knew that being a pimp meant that they could have multiple wives or girlfriends, but she pretended that she was not sharing Jay with anyone else to keep her emotions at bay. Stuck in a toxic relationship, Thanh pushed to stay by his side and would make excuses for him, forcing herself to believe that Jay liked her best and that she was not "less valuable" than the other girls (p. 91).

Throughout her adult life, Thanh endures a destructive relationship after a destructive relationship, a stint in jail, dealt and did drugs, and struggled with self-harm and mental health. By committing herself to her writing, Thanh is able to connect with her sense of self even in her darkest days, and through all this, Thanh is able to find solace through writing, which kept her going through every phase of her life. She writes in her memoir, "[t]rying to write my way out felt like turning off one light while turning on another" (p. 161). Even when it feels like she was deeper than rock bottom, she commits to and prioritizes herself in order not to lose her sense of self.

Avery is a pimp that Thanh had a complex relationship. He started out as her pimp, and their relationship grew to one that was similar to her past relationships. While both loved one another in their own way, it was much more complex and toxic. Thanh's "staying power" and

"obedience" to Avery had earned her a reputation and the respect of others in the industry (p. 151), which gave her a sense of power and accomplishment. Even when Avery's reputation as a pimp began to fall, Thanh felt even more accomplished because now that her man has lost his reputation, it made him dependent on her. She "reduced him to a little boy whom I had to protect" (p. 152).

After a few years, Thanh and Avery's relationship reduced down to them just speaking to one another, Thanh explaining as if a fence were in between the two. During this stage, Thanh begins to realize her potential and has gained insight and wisdom in the aftermath of her life experiences so far. She stops working the streets to focus on her and Avery's grow up and later on gives him an ultimatum; she was going to leave him if he did not better himself. During this tumultuous on-and-off relationship with Avery, Thanh continued writing. However, the doubts about her future and herself were holding her back like a sickness she could not recover from. She knew that she had to leave Avery to pursue her own goals and move up in life. "No amount of craft or technique would improve me so long as I stayed with Avery" (p. 173).

Her borderline personality disorder plays a prominent role in this story though Thanh does not address how much it has affected her life until the latter half of the book. After more trips abroad and more toxic partners, Thanh is able to settle down with her two young children and attend classes at the University of Victoria to pursue her love of creativity and writing. Her first big break in her professional writing career was winning an award for best short story published in Canada. However, soon after, her mental and physical health began to deteriorate, and Thanh was eventually admitted into a psych ward, but not before going back to the streets for drugs one last time. It is only in her forties that Thanh's mental illnesses are properly diagnosed though she

struggles with the treatments and medication that can only help so much.

Overall, Thanh's memoir was well written though her accounts describing her childhood as an overachieving, academically accomplished student while doing drugs in the bathroom and being put on academic probation for not attending class sounds unrealistic. It seems very unlikely that Thanh is able to personify both student types at the same time; however, Thanh may have exaggerated her star student status as a way to make her decline into delinquency much more significant. Another thought came to mind as the memoir progressed; Thanh was quite privileged in terms of having the freedom to do what she wants in her spare time, like reading and writing, being able to travel and get an occasional sweater from Holt Renfrew for free. Many women in the sex trade do not have the luxury of choice, or even safety, whereas Thanh could leave the industry if she really wanted to. Her craving for acceptance by her pimps made her stay, emphasizing her obsession with finding love and receiving the same kind of love back.

Through her writing, Thanh inspires her reader by showing the complexity and messiness that is the human experience. She shows that even though we may feel like we are going through terrible times and there is no end in sight, we are actually not stuck, and there is a light at the end of the tunnel if one perseveres and focuses on what is important. By sharing details of personal moments in her life that no other person would, by the end of the book, Thanh makes the reader want to congratulate her on all the achievements she has made for herself. I recommend this memoir to anyone that is interested in stories that are not just raw and unfiltered but want a story with a wholesome ending. Thanh does have a happy ending, but it has been an uphill battle where

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she would take one step forward and two steps back. The specific academic audience this book relates to is anyone studying or is interested in women's studies, mental health and the impact of addiction, prostitution and homelessness. In the broader sense, this book would be an interesting read for those studying sociology and psychology.