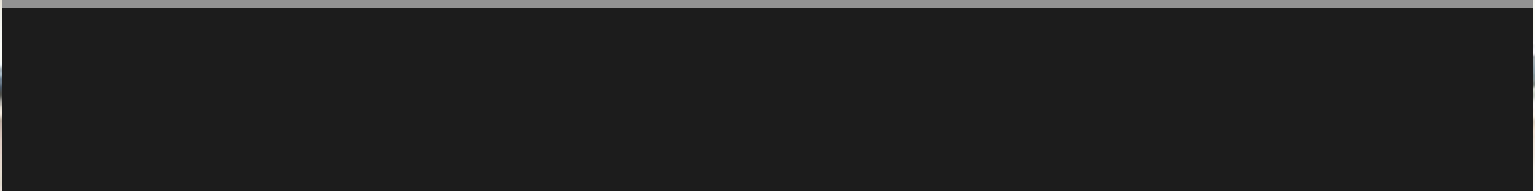
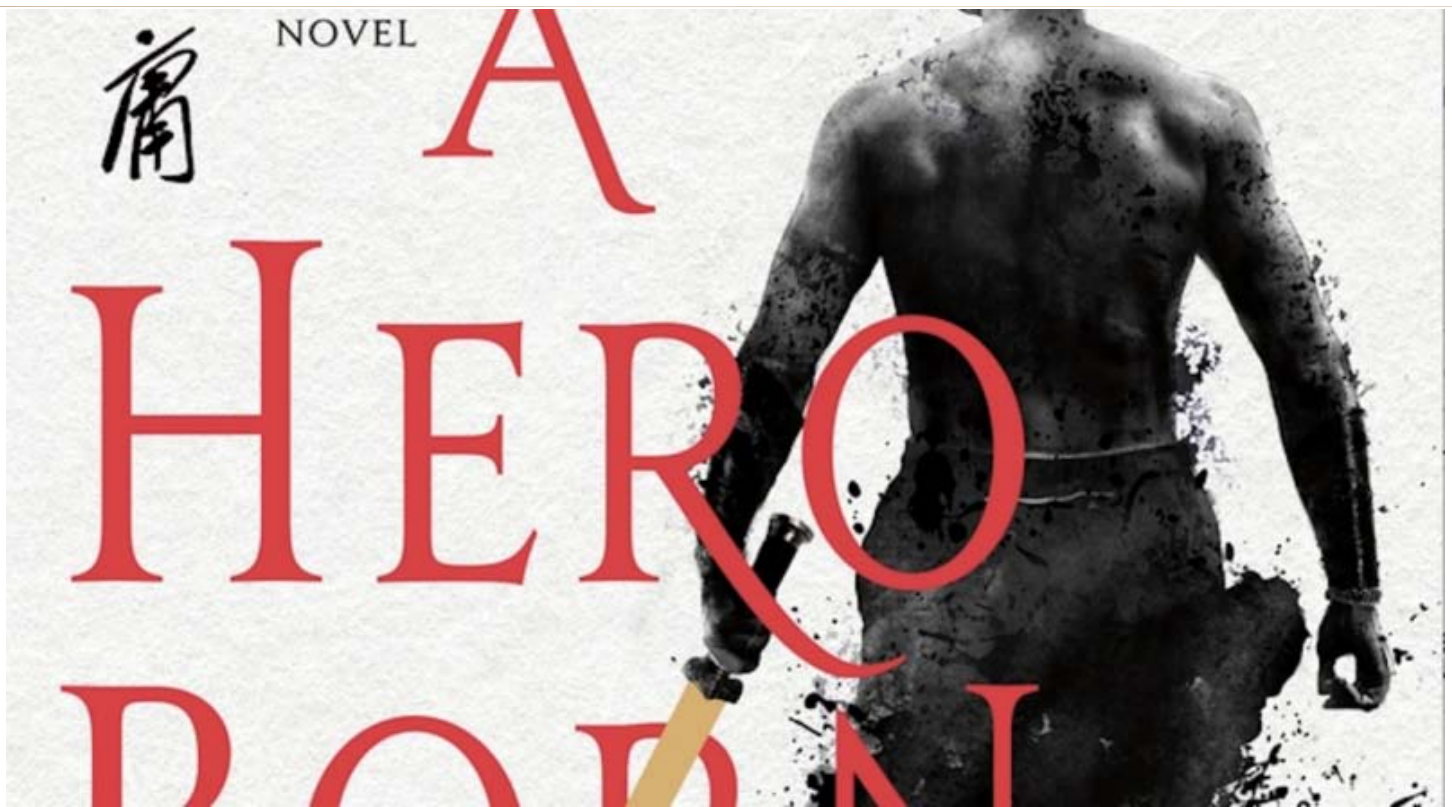


Tuesday, October 1, 2019

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FICTION

Crouching Author, Hidden Classic

A Chinese Legend Arrives in the West

October 1, 2019 Michael Giltz

The thrilling movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* blew me away in the year 2000. Samurai films? All over it. But wuxia, the historical genre that combines martial arts with flights of fantasy? Not only had I never seen such a film (or book or TV show), I didn't even know the genre *existed*.

I wanted more, right away. So I dove into the genre that *Crouching Tiger* celebrated. I also ran to the library so I could read the classic novels by Wang Dulu on which Ang Lee based the film.

No such luck. They weren't available in English. And despite the movie's record-breaking box office all over the world, they still aren't. Come to think of it, I also couldn't find decent translations of any stories about the Monkey King, a character as beloved and familiar in the East as Robin Hood is in the West.

The more I looked, the more titles I found trapped behind the Great Wall of No English Translation.

And the more titles I wrote down, the more one author's name appeared again and again: Jin Yong. When Jin died last October at the age of 94, Western media outlets tossed out names like Harry Potter and Star Wars to capture how beloved and well known his stories are throughout Asia.

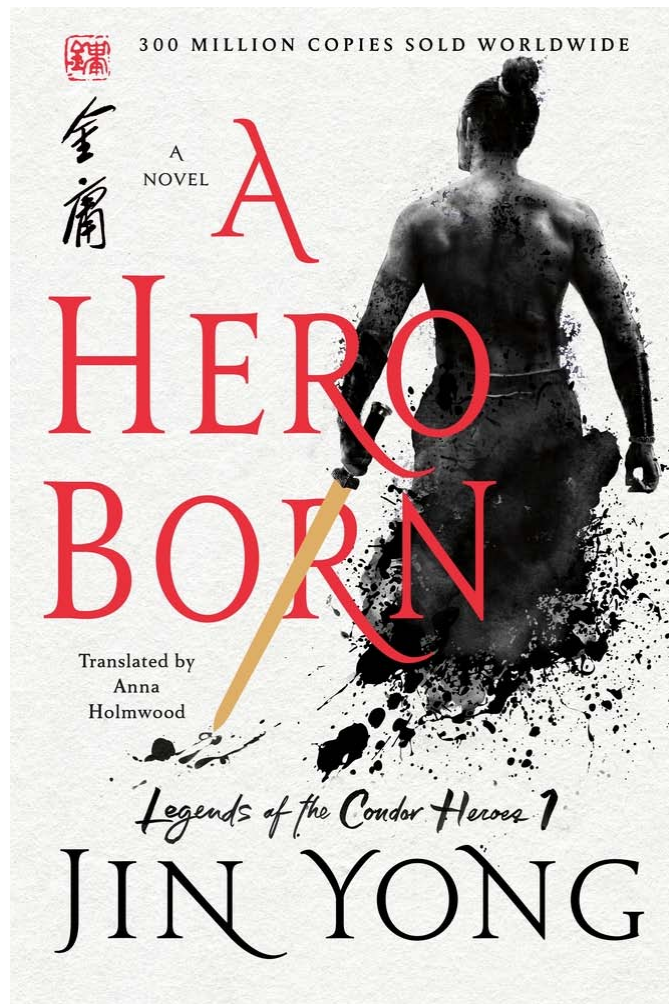
Jin wrote a string of classic adventures, serializing them in newspapers like Charles Dickens and then collecting them in books. He's sold 300 million copies worldwide. People have adapted his stories again and again into movies and TV shows and comics. In short, he's the Chinese J.R.R. Tolkien.

Well, not quite. Yes, Jin's novels have a modest dose of fantasy. But they're rooted in this world, so a much better comparison is Alexandre Dumas, who knew a thing or two about thrilling adventures.

Both deliver page-turning plots—thank you, serialization. Both favor earnest young heroes surrounded and educated by cynical elders, d'Artagnan for the one; Guo Jing for the other. Both keep an eye on politics and how society crushes the weak, Dumas by commenting on the events of recent years; Jin by safely placing his commentary in the far distant past.

So think of *A Hero Born* as a Chinese *Three Musketeers* more than a Chinese *Lord Of The Rings*.

All For One and Two for All



The opening is instantly familiar to generations of fans. It's 1205 CE, the age of the Song Empire in China. An itinerant storyteller passing through the tiny Ox Village spins his stories for a modest audience, speaking of injustice in the big cities far away. Two young men who love their country but decry the corruption in the capital invite this stranger to share their meal.

Tragedy strikes and soldiers slaughter the young men, who pay the price for the stranger's defiance of sleazy government officials. Their two children narrowly escape a similar bloody fate, with the stranger determined to find and raise the boys in martial arts to honor his debt.

That's just the first few pages. A childhood among the faithful followers of Genghis Khan awaits one child. The other is raised in a different type of isolation. But each eventually proves a master of martial arts. Then the story really takes off, with famous set pieces like a showy display of fighting in a roadside tavern, a gang of freaks (heroes to their friends) who each specialize in a certain style of fighting, romance, betrayal, epic battle scenes, private grudges, forced marriages, and much more.

A Seagull Skims the Sea

A Hero Born is book one in a quartet known as Legends of the Condor Heroes. And that four-part series contains just one novel of a trilogy. All in all, there are twelve books in this sprawling, multi-generational tale.

A few points. I can't speak to the translation, of course. It's certainly not the stiff and literal word-for-word English translations I've found of certain Monkey King tales, efforts devoid of any poetry or readability.

Still, a translation of such a beloved classic inevitably sparks strong feelings. Online, you'll discover ferocious debates about many issues here, especially the naming of characters and why translator Anna Holmwood should (or more often should *not*) have translated one character's name into Lotus. Her explanation seems logical enough to me, but I suppose if a translator renamed Gandalf He Who Dies And Comes Back Wearing White in a French edition, I too might take exception at such a spoiler.

Worse, the characters in *A Hero Born* don't feel as rich as those in the best adventure tales or even the film *Crouching Tiger*, blessed as it was by great actors. Whether that's the original writing or Holmwood's effort to convey it in English, I don't know. Since this is only book one of twelve, I'll withhold judgment, especially since books five to eight are said to contain the greatest romance in the genre's history. If that doesn't move me, I'll know something is lacking.

Another potential stumbling block for some? The awkwardly-translated description of the book's many fights. Here's one very typical passage: "Mu Yi adjusted his sash and leaped into a Seagull Skims The Sea. The young man responded with a blow to the old man's belly, in a Poison Snake Seeks The Cave."

Often, these evocative names create an image in your mind. If you want to make an effort to literally picture what is being done, you can. I just went with it, thoroughly enjoying this approach to action scenes without bothering to figure out exactly what the heck is going on.

Indeed, I felt that same enjoyment while barreling through the 400-plus pages of *A Hero Born* in two days. We have to wait until March for Book Two, *A Bond Undone*? At that rate I won't know what I really think of the entire 12-part series for another five years. But I do know I'm going to find out.

Tags: *A Hero Born*, Ang Lee, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, Jin Yong, wuxia

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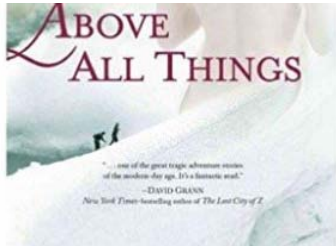


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Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the *New York Post*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Magazine*, *The Advocate*, *Out*, *Huffington Post*, *Premiere Magazine*,

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