

Divided states of America

Mary Ann Gwinn

It was shortly after September 11 and the US had just declared war on Iraq. "Everyone was so gung-ho, saying, 'We'll go to war, we'll kick butt, we'll be out in two weeks,'" author Robert Ferrigno recalls. "But writers like to invert logic. I thought, 'What if it's a long war?'"

Ferrigno wasn't a prescient foreign policy expert but a successful writer of thrillers, set mostly in Southern California, and he took a risk by writing an "alternative history", a novel that takes a pivotal point in history and goes in the opposite direction.

Ferrigno's premise was that "in a long war, it's the spiritual strength of the combatants that matters". Devotees of Islam are fervent and have exceedingly long memories. Americans, on the other hand... "If it's an hour old, it's too old," Ferrigno says. "If we can't win, we want to get out now."

Thus was born Ferrigno's *Prayers for the Assassin* (2006). Washington, New York and Mecca have been targeted by nuclear weapons and Zionist fanatics are blamed. Worn out by a long war, most Americans have converted to Islam and pledge allegiance to the Islamic States of America. But bad guys, including the Black Robes, a radical right-wing Islamic sect, are trying to seize power and only Rakkim Epps, an elite soldier, stands in their way.

Prayers received excellent reviews and was followed by *Sins of the Assassin*. Now the third in the trilogy is out: *Heart of the Assassin*.

Ferrigno's counterintuitive premise turned him into an amateur scholar of Islam and connected him with a worldwide audience.

Surprisingly, he has a devoted military readership. "The military likes the fact that the stakes are so high, that this is a fight for values and sovereignty. There is a continuity to Islam, a sense of right and wrong, and the military has a sense of right and wrong," he says.

And a good chunk of his international readers are Muslim. Foreign versions of the *Assassin* books were first published in Turkey; the Egyptian edition has been distributed throughout the Arabic-speaking world.

Ferrigno has a spirited correspondence with his Muslim readers – "Even the angry ones are trying to educate me," he says, laughing. "But 98 per cent of the comments are positive; they feel it's so rare that Muslims are treated as human beings."

It has been a long haul: six years of contemplating religious war and apocalyptic terror. But here is the rewarding part of writing entertaining, thought-provoking books: people read them. Ferrigno received a letter after *Prayers* was published from a working-class Englishman in his 20s. "He said *Prayers for the Assassin* was the first book he ever read all the way through," Ferrigno says. *McClatchy-Tribune*

Kongkee and Lee Chi-hoi tell **Didi Kirsten Tatlow** what inspired them to turn literary works by some of the city's most popular writers into graphic tales

Comic relief

Asia Specific

Over breakfast at their hotel in Frankfurt, Hong Kong's most popular comics duo, Kongkee and Lee Chi-hoi, smile – and with their trademark humour try to explain why they decided to turn 12 works by some of the SAR's best-known writers into comics.

"Most Hong Kong people think Hong Kong writing is too serious and they don't read it. But we don't find it boring," says Kongkee, whose real name is Kong Khong-chang.

The two men have a habit of finishing each other's sentences, so it comes as no surprise when Lee adds: "So we tried to adapt their writing to comics to make it easier for them to read."

The result was *Hijacking*, a hugely successful, two-volume comics interpretation of literary works by well-known Hong Kong authors such as Xi Xi, Dung Kai-cheung, Quanan, Liu Yichang, Wong Bik-wan and Leung Ping-kwan.

Kong and Lee, both 32, were in the German city to attend the 61st Frankfurt Book Fair, where they were meeting other comics writers and publishers as well as representing Hong Kong literature in a small delegation of six writers funded by the Home Affairs Bureau.

Lee and Kong both seem permanently on the edge of laughter. In fact so playful is the impression they create that it comes as a shock to hear about their dark, early works.

Lee's, an untitled, self-published work, is about a nameless woman writer who dies – "of heaviness", he says. Ask why, and one receives a chirpy smile in response. Yet the subject matter seems close to his heart. "She has a hunchback and feels life is too heavy. It bends her over," he says.

"A friend suggests she writes to release her pain. But her story is so heavy she can't even mail or fax it to anyone. In the end she drowns because she's so heavy." And he looks wryly amused.

Perhaps Lee's early dark vision can be understood by his struggle to recognise and express his creative talent in a difficult cultural environment. In a Hong Kong context, where artistry has for a long time been looked down on as time-wasting and parents actively discourage children from pursuing creative careers, being an artist is hard, and the very creative impulse can be a burden, Lee seems to be saying. Neither Lee nor Kong was supposed to become an artist: Lee studied food science and nutrition at the Chinese University, where Kong studied finance.

Malaysian-born Kong came to Hong Kong when he was one and grew up in Tai Po. He began drawing



[Chi-hoi and I] were both dark in our [literary] beginnings. Now we try to look at the craziness of our city life

Kong Khong-chang (above)



Comics don't pay, so Lee Chi-hoi is also a book designer and illustrator

comics while still at university, contributing to a magazine called *Comic Teens*. "After I graduated it collapsed," he recalls. His first work was titled *Imperfect Shoes*, a "dark fairy tale about city life".

"It's the story of a prince and a princess who live happily ever after in the end, but many other characters suffer from their happiness." In it, he explains, a magician turns a princess into a piano, and the spell can only be broken if someone sits down to play a song that truly comes from the heart. That special someone does come along in the form of a prince, and the princess is freed. But she leaves behind forever her son, who is turned into a piano stool.

Then Kong grins. "We were both dark in our beginnings. But nowadays we're very different. Now we try to look at the craziness of our city life in happy ways."

Their main issues are the environment and the need for "more imagination – what if people can live in more positive ways?" Neither Lee nor Kong can live off their art, so both have day jobs. Lee is a book designer and illustrator. Kong teaches visual communication at secondary schools.

Hong Kong writers lack confidence in their output, they say. "Everyone thinks there is no literature in Hong Kong and when they see it they are surprised," says Kong. In *Hijacking*, the artists focus on a key theme from each of the original works.

So in Quanan's novel *Door on the Ground*, in which the main character rushes at and tries to change his rigid destiny, Lee puts all the action within strictly constructed boxes. Plot takes place in the background only.

The comics were originally published in the *Ming Pao* newspaper starting in September 2005, switching to *Zihua* magazine in 2006. They were published in book form in 2007.

In *Going Wrong* by Kong, the artist takes novelist Liu's experiments with language in *Wrong Number* by playing with the form of the comic.

Caught between two comics frames, the main character fails to jump fast enough and is knocked over by a car.

Readers try to find the original works after reading the comics. "That makes us happy," says Kong. Lee nods in enthusiastic agreement.