Juicy and stylish search for origins

Katie Goh explores the fascinating and thoroughly messy history of the orange

Diarmuid Hester

Foreign Fruit: A Personal History of the Orange
By Katie Goh

Canongate, 256pp, £16.99

I'll be honest with you, I don't even like oranges. They're too messy. Drippy, sticky; forever associated in my mind with my schoolmates' grubby little fingers clawing at the glossy skin at breaktimes or on the bus. Ugh! Somebody give that child a wet wipe.

But for the Irish writer and critic Katie Goh, the messiness of the orange is exactly the point. As her superbly reflective, restive, and revealing book shows, this fruit that many of us take for granted has a fascinating and thoroughly messy history.

Its millenniums-long narrative criss-crosses the globe from western China to southern California and back again, cropping up all over the place, especially in accounts that the author refuses to clean up or sanitise – of colonial expansion, racialised bigotry, and capitalist exploitation. "The orange is a souvenir of history," she writes, "entangled with the story of migration, of exile, and of invasion".

It's tangled up with her own story, too. She started writing the book in the aftermath of a mass shooting in Atlanta on March 17th, 2021, that left six Asian women dead at the hands of a white male supremacist. Anti-Asian sentiment had risen sharply during the pandemic, but this was a terrifying escalation. She remembers: "The morning after a white man murdered six Asian women, I ate five oranges."

Out of this moment, charged with shock and horror, where the eating of oranges was like grieving, like a tribute to those who were murdered, came an impulse to trace the roots of her identity in parallel with the oranges she held in her hands.

Goh was born and raised outside Belfast, the child of an Irish mother and a Chinese father, in a place that was 99 per cent white; so white, she says, that she could count on the fingers of one hand the non-white children in her school. When she was growing up, she felt her difference acutely but couldn't really inhabit it. Being mixed-race, she found herself pulled in two directions, falling between categories – "not Asian or White but Other". She also had an inkling that she was queer, "not Straight or Gay but Other".

Lingering in this space of otherness instilled in her a lifelong feeling of dislocation, and a desire for connection "to a place, to a history, to a sense of belonging". Foreign Fruit tracks her pursuit of that connection alongside a global history of the orange, which becomes for her "a talisman, a compass, an anchor, a map", inextricable from its origins in Chinese antiquity.

The first mention of oranges can be found in the Shujing, the ancient Chinese documents compiled by Confucius as early as 500 BC, and Goh's book starts in China, with a trip to Fujian, where her father's people once lived before they emigrated to Malaysia.

From the sparsely populated villages of her ancestors, she travels to the heaving streets of Chang'an, the world's marketplace, haggling with a fruit vendor in the town "where the Silk Roads begin and end and where they begin anew".

Returning to Europe, in the Netherlands, she reflects on the spoils of colonial warfare and greed represented by a Willem Kalf still life of an orange and a lemon dating from 1660. In Vienna, she visits the Schönbrunn Orangerie, an ostentatious symptom of the "citrusmania" that spread across Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. Crossing the Atlantic, she delivers a detailed and emotional investigation of the orange's history in California that confronts the violent impact on immigrant communities of the early-20th century "orange rush".

Goh is a bold new voice in Irish writing. In less capable hands, a personal history of the orange could be an opportunity merely to write one's life in citrus, to absorb one into the other. But as the author reminds us, there are dangers in taking people for plants, which have historically threatened people of colour: eugenicists in the late-19th and early 20th centuries, for instance, endeavoured to "control, curtail, cull" non-white populations as they did their orange groves. The sophistication of Goh's thinking shows itself in the glimmer of daylight she leaves between human and fruit.

Foreign Fruit is a stunning, stylish search for origins reminiscent of books like Saidiya Hartman's Lose Your Mother, and the work of queer writers like James Baldwin, who called himself "a stranger everywhere" and whose rootlessness was a creative wellspring. "The borders between what is native and what is foreign become hazier as we step back into the past," remarks Goh, and her forays across the world and through time attest to the power and the imaginative richness of movement, migration, messiness – the in-between of assumed positions.

"The world is made of hybrids,' she writes. "Purity is an illusion."

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Orange, Ichang variety, Citrus sinensis, Wuhan, Hubei, China, Watercolor, illustration by Amanda Almira Newton. IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

Poem Snail Notes

By Patrick Cotter

Whorley snail, terrifier in its botanical realm,
ravager of leaves with its shearing jellied
mouth. Its shell protects only against shrivelling
desiccation in a drought. It scabs a snotty screen
across its home's gaping floor. A shrew's milk teeth
could crush the crisp of its armour. As a baby, poised
on a daffodil stalk, it is a mobile brown globule
slowly pouring itself, a muddy raindrop, an uphill-drip.
Sometimes slow enough to appear still, like an inedible
stone or flake of wind-dropped bark to a cloud-high
crow. For all its ponderous existence it extols no
philosophies, but provokes thought in others, not least
daffodils who rasp at one another through their roots
at times of ooze and prowl, after dews and wind howl.

Patrick Cotter's fourth collection, Quality Control at the Miracle Factory, was published recently by Dedalus Press. patrickcotter.ie