



## Frontier

*Can Xue* , Porochista Khakpour (Introduction) , Karen Gernant (Translator) , Chen Zeping (Translator)

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## New Novel from the Winner of the 2015 Best Translated Book Award

Introduction by Porochista Khakpour.

"One of the most raved-about works of translated fiction this year"—Jonathan Sturgeon, *Flavorwire*

*Frontier* opens with the story of Liujin, a young woman heading out on her own to create her own life in Pebble Town, a somewhat surreal place at the base of Snow Mountain where wolves roam the streets and certain enlightened individuals can see and enter a paradisiacal garden.

Exploring life in this city (or in the frontier) through the viewpoint of a dozen different characters, some simple, some profound, Can Xue's latest novel attempts to unify the grand opposites of life--barbarism and civilization, the spiritual and the material, the mundane and the sublime, beauty and death, Eastern and Western cultures.

A layered, multifaceted masterpiece from the 2015 winner of the Best Translated Book Award, *Frontier* exemplifies John Darnielle's statement that Can Xue's books read "as if dreams had invaded the physical world."

**Can Xue** is a pseudonym meaning "dirty snow, leftover snow." She learned English on her own and has written books on Borges, Shakespeare, and Dante. Her publications in English include *The Embroidered Shoes*, *Five Spice Street*, *Vertical Motion*, and *The Last Lover*, which won the 2015 Best Translated Book Award for Fiction.

**Karen Gernant** is a professor emerita of Chinese history at Southern Oregon University. She translates in collaboration with Chen Zeping.

**Chen Zeping** is a professor of Chinese linguistics at Fujian Teachers' University, and has collaborated with Karen Gernant on more than ten translations.

**Porochista Khakpour** is the author of two novels, *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* and *The Last Illusion*.

## Frontier Details

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# From Reader Review Frontier for online ebook

## Miri says

It's so hard for me to give up on a book, especially one I've heard great things about, but I'm just not even enjoying this. I know it's experimental but I think it might be too experimental for me. I'm somewhere around page 110 and none of it, I mean almost literally none of it, makes any sense. I read pages and pages and have no idea what happened, whether any of it was real, if any of the characters are real people, if some of them are actually more than one person, if things twenty years apart are happening at the same time . . . It's so confusing, and I can't even see it going anywhere, because things would have to *happen* in order to accomplish the going.

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## Angie says

I want to start with saying that this won't be an extremely long review. This book was of a different reading format and style, and I found it to be quite refreshing. If a person chooses to read *Frontier*, that person will have to be patient and be able to enjoy constant references to nature. It takes a depth of concentration for this book to make any sense. I allowed myself at least 2 weeks to slowly read through, so I might not miss too many details. There were many ideas and points of view happening, that I sometimes even found myself confused. I would then have to think specifically about what I had earlier read. Before I had reached the halfway mark, I noticed something I had never seen in any book (and I've read a few books before). In the Table of Contents, Chapter 6 is listed as Liujin and Amy. When I turned to page 143, the title was Liujin and Roy. At first I thought it was a mistake. I'd never seen anything like that before. It seemed interesting to me. After reading this book though, I feel it very well could have been intentional! Overall, I'm glad with my decision to read it.

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## Nate D says

Reading *Frontier* is a bit like watching a very large polaroid form its image slowly over a very extended period of time. At first all is fuzzy. The people in the picture, and the events surrounding them, seem like arbitrary blurs with little connection or resolution. Over the course of the novel, these shapes take on increasing detail and depth, and the spaces between them fill in so that an overarching organization can be detected. Hundreds of pages pass first -- it's a slow process, you might think of setting this novel aside and moving on to something else, but you press on, trying to make out the emerging image. Then, you look again and these vague shapes have become real in some way. What's more, you realize that they always were. You just couldn't see it before. Suddenly you want to spend a little longer with these lives, Liujin and Roy, Amy and Qi-Ming, but already the image has set, the pattern revealed, detailed but not without remaining ambiguity, and there will be no more. However, the sense may linger that the process of increasing resolution has continued elsewhere, off the page. These lives go on without you.

I really did almost give up. Can Xue's surreal, liminal community seemed like somewhere I'd clearly want to spend time, but takes a lot of time and effort for the book to develop a kind of cohesion. Not that everything makes sense or comes together in the end either. There are internal threads, but no, this is a novel of strange moments, fragmentary stories and isolated people, and it defies rational order. Or its orders are hard to detect

besides in broad strokes. Could it have been improvised? Still: we have a yearning. People seek connection, watch the animal world, and seek earthy paradise that may not be real. Or may instead be under our noses all along. Can Xue's trick is make all this uncertainty and irresolution feel like some real and human thing in spite of itself. Just barely, only late in the process, and after threatening not to at all turns.

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## **Sookie says**

*Frontier* is set in a small town with long roads, freely moving wild animals and people who build a strange symbiotic relationship with the nature and the town itself. Can Xue weaves a surreal story set in a time and space unlike the one we live in. The town sits on a frontier expanding to a dense forest on one side and a snowy mountain on the other. A design institute takes up half the town with houses, gardens, shops dotting around it. The foot traffic in this town is less and gives the appearance of "lost in depths of time" to new residents.

*Frontier* is narrated through the eyes of half a dozen townsfolk, some new and some old. The layered narration digs deeper into the town's happenstances and bursts through the fabric of realism. The semi-spiritual, mostly fantastical elements that not-so-subtly happen around the townsfolk rarely get a deep dived explanation. The plot maintains a fascinating balance of pragmatism and enigma. As much as this is story about half a dozen people, its also a story about the intricate way animals blends their lives with humanity. Nature is deeply ingrained in lives of these people; they till the lands, garden often, maintain beautiful yards or enjoy long walks in the forest. Nature isn't a metaphor or a mode of escapism in *Frontier*. It is as much as a character, like a living breathing thing that has the capacity to influence the lives of the townsfolk.

The novel suffers from staggering narration and slow build. Personally, its an enjoyable trait but with surrealistic style and tangential overtures, the book exhibits intertextuality that becomes cumbersome and is often fragmented within the book. Can Xue's writing has been known for her style and the sheer surrealistic approach she takes. Her writing is a force of nature; there is no doubt about that but it does require patience and a need to slow down. Like the way she writes about park of poplar trees with idle geckos and irritable foxes, a reader needs to get away from the distractions of the world and read *Frontier* as if everything else has ceased to exist.

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## **Alison Hardtmann says**

*Frontier* is an experimental novel by Chinese writer Can Xue set in on the northern border in Pebble Town, an odd city dominated by the mysterious Design Institute. Each chapter follows a different character or group of characters, but the story centers on Liujin, a woman living on her own since her parents retired to Smoke City. As she, and those she comes into contact with, go about their lives, odd things happen.

*Frontier* is described as surreal and there is a folk tale feel to this novel, with wolves and snow leopards wandering through the marketplace, a garden floats and young woman's hand occasionally transforms into a scythe. Sometimes the bizarre is remarked upon, at least by newcomers, but mostly the residents of Pebble Town continue to live their odd lives and think their random thoughts. Most of the book has the feeling of a dream sequence, where events occur unrelated to the events that precede or follow. Time and space are equally unstable.

This book defeated me. I read the entire thing, but each new, weird occurrence left me increasingly disconnected from whatever Can Xue was trying to communicate. The writing was stilted and varied between short lyrical segments interspersed with jarring, technical-feeling language. I'm uncertain of what was the intention of the author and what is the result of a tone-deaf translation. I have other issues with the translation, which leads me to think that the translators did the author a disservice beginning with the odd decision to give half of the characters random westernized names. What I'm left with is having slogged through a novel-length first draft of someone's dream. I suspect that had I a decent knowledge of modern Chinese literature and folklore, or had read this as part of a class, I might have been able to find the substance in this vaporous vision. It was interesting to venture so far from what I usually read, but I can't call the experience a rewarding one.

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## **Jason says**

Pseudonymously-named Can Xue (the name means "dirty snow" or "leftover snow" and apparently invokes pejorative language used in China to denigrate the kind of experimental fiction she writes) writes the mystical. That is to say that the mystical is her subject, and that she seems so enmeshed in the mystical that she herself becomes expressed in it (as an a posteriori expression of it). Never has a pseudonym (it could have been any pseudonym) been more appropriate. This is the first book of hers I have gotten ahold of, having for some time been intrigued by evidence encountered here and there of her considerable reputation. I have never read anything quite like it. One might be tempted to call FRONTIER magical realism, but I feel like this would suggest the book in some way fits w/ an established template which it determinedly does not. It seems to me extremely timely that I would read this book as TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN (which I have been watching religiously week to week) was rolling to its finish. Not only does Pebble Town, the locality on the titular frontier where everything more or less takes place, bear some parallel with television's most famous oddball Pacific Northwest town, but I see Can Xue doing something similar to what David Lynch does. Lynch has spoken of using transcendental meditation to take his creativity into the deepest waters possible, where strange and beautiful fish (totally alien to less devoted divers) thrive. Can Xue likewise seems to want to create from the depths. I suspect she, like Lynch, is not the least bit interested in parsing what her work means or signifies. She simply wants to let creation vibrate in an unobstructed fashion. One senses that something close to automatic writing is happening here, self-censorship being deployed minimally. One may wish to compare the book to dream (some have), but to me FRONTIER speaks above all else to the creative act. The style is simple and fascinating. For nominally experimental fiction the book is unique in proceeding in a nakedly sequential fashion, not entirely unlike a children's story. This happens, then this happens, then this happens, then this happens. It is calm and leisurely writing but in constant engagement with the fantastical. There is a mystical quality to causality here, a sense of the re-scaling of reality inherent to experiences w/ psychedelic drugs, and characters who are very often mysteriously moved or wholly awed. This is a demonstratively strange world, and there is no reason to expose it to much scrutiny. I felt like the characters feel. This is an epic achievement, immersing the reader in a near-haptic conjuring. I was so zoned-in that I felt as though the weather in the book were my weather. I feel like I have been to Pebble Town. I could not draw you a map. Maps? What a boundless absurdity!

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## **J.M. Hushour says**

Imagine that the show "Twin Peaks" was a 64-year old Chinese woman who was sitting next to you in your booth at a mescaline club in an alternate reality, and you would have "Frontier".

The author, Can Xue (a clever pseudonym which means "dirty, leftover snow"), is actually a 64-year old Chinese woman and very well might be from an alternate reality. Or at least writes from one right at you. This is a work of the kind of weird, headlong, heady genius that most people would sniff at. For instance, if you read in public on purpose behind a cup with your name or initials written on it, you probably wouldn't like this book. If you like linear narratives and ill-fitting pants, you probably wouldn't like this book. If you're afraid of wolves haunting the streets of Pebble Town while the Design Institute near the snow mountain devours the maybe-dead into questionable lifeworks and hotels stock the beds with centipedes and the hospitals stock themselves with poisonous butterflies, then you probably WOULD like this work.

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## **Lark Benobi says**

Huh.

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## **A.M.G. says**

Rating: technically reserved / 5

Even if I pay money to own the book, I cannot get through something that bores me to sleep. In the case of *Frontier*, I couldn't even stick to my minimum 50-page rule and make it even that far. There was nothing happening insofar as I could tell, the writing was a tad tiresome, with paragraphs of description and abrupt changes in topic with no precursor, and overall, I just couldn't seem to care about what was happening, no matter how bizarre the author tried to make it sound.

As such, I reserve judgement for this novel and will wait until I feel like picking it up again and getting through it. With a lifetime ahead of me, maybe at some point I will care enough to try again.

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## **MJ Nicholls says**

Can Xue imagine(s) an airtight surreal alt-real populated by headless men, wolves and geckos, shifting mountains, and a Design Institute that serves no real function(?). In *Frontier*, China's "premier writer of the avant-garde, an experimental trickster" (Porochista Khakpour) creates a striking sequence of happenings in the lives various unusuals, foremost of whom is the wild Liujin. Xue calls her style "material writing", and takes "our Great Nature, especially our dark Earth Mother", as her subject. The landscape and the characters are entwined in mysterious and inexplicable ways, and across the novel time, place, people, and events are woven together in a timeless flux. The novel's impish fluidity and improvisation that keeps the reader charmed, amused, and ensorcelled. Unique.

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## **Riet says**

Het is bijna onmogelijk om over dit boek een review te schrijven. De schrijfster heeft al heel veel geschreven en schijnt erg populair te zijn. Dit is het eerste wat ik van haar lees. Het verhaal speelt zich grotendeels af in Pebble town, een stadje aan de grens van China(?). Alles is vaag. Mensen trekken er naar toe om in het

"Design Institute" te gaan werken. Nergens wordt beschreven wat ze daar doen. Enerzijds is het een verhaal over het leven in die stad, maar er is een andere laag, die je magisch realistisch zou kunnen noemen, maar het gaat veel verder dan in de boeken van Garcia Marquez of Murakami. Alles is vaag, mensen zijn vaak niet wat ze lijken, er is een tropische tuin, die alleen onder bepaalde omstandigheden zichtbaar is, etc. Er komen veel dieren in voor. Wat hun betekenis precies is? Ondanks het voorgaande is het een boek, dat je in een adem uit wilt lezen. Geleidelijk aan worden dingen wel wat duidelijker, maar toch word je steeds weer op het verkeerde been gezet. Prachtig geschreven en duidelijk heel goed vertaald uit het Chinees.

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### Joseph Schreiber says

R Can Xue is not an easy read, not because her language or concepts are difficult but because she challenges what is expected in narrative form and structure. I have a detailed review published at Numero Cinq. See: <http://numerocinqmagazine.com/2017/04...>

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### Clayton says

Possibly the worst feeling you can have as a reader is the sensation that some brilliant work respected by all the people you respect completely fails to connect. All the right people have said all the right things about *Frontier* and it seems like everything I would like. But I just don't get it and I don't like it. At all. And I hate to think that I'm missing out on the party when so many people have so many interesting things to say about it, but I apart from a few lovely, disconnected images I am getting literally nothing out of this book, and I don't hate myself or attend graduate school, so I'm dropping it halfway through and getting on with my life.

I like unusual fiction, experimental fiction is only "experimental" when it doesn't work, and boy oh boy is this a whopping big "experiment." I still love the *idea* of Can Xue, though.

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### LindaJ^ says

I've held off writing this review for a day, hoping it would become clearer to me how to describe this book. But alas nothing has struck me as comprehensible. Perhaps that's to be expected, as ultimately I did not find this novel to be comprehensible, at least in any way I would normally describe a novel. Many reviewers turn to the quote from John Darnielle on the back of the book -- "Can Xue's books read 'as if dreams had invaded the physical world.'" It is an excellent description of how the book reads, just as I found the only book I've read by Darnielle to read -- like a bad dream.

The primary character is Liujin. The book begins and ends with her point of view when she is about 35. And we see her often throughout the book -- sometimes at her current age, sometimes as a baby, and sometimes as a young girl. Yes, time is rather elusive in this book -- for reader and characters it seemed to me. People appear and disappear and then reappear again. Sometimes they reappear and you did not even know they had disappeared until they are back. At times I found myself enjoying getting different characters view of the same incident. But then something weird would happen and I was once again scratching my head.

The writing (or perhaps better stated, the translation) was easy to read. The sentences were well-crafted. But putting it all together was a challenge. I read that the author just writes and does not edit. And that is easy to

believe! On the back cover, the book is described as attempting "to unify grand opposites of life -- barbarism and civilization, the spiritual and the material, the mundane and the sublime, beauty and death, Eastern and Western civilization." I can see that these topics (other than Eastern and Western civilization) are present but after reading the book, I had no sense that the author was attempting to unify them. I look forward to the August discussion of this book in the GR Newest Literary Fiction group.

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### **Nadine says**

I think I just wasn't in the right mood for this book. As far as I could tell after reading the first 50 pages or so, it's got a kind of serious whimsy (an oxymoron that means something to me, at least!) that I could have liked. For example, character names. Why are two Chinese characters named Nancy and Juan, but the others have Chinese-language names? This strikes me as the kind of book that wouldn't explain that - it just is what it is. You don't read this book for a plot - you just let the characters and situations flow over you and surf it like a wave. The writing is clean and clear, so it will be an easy ride. I hope I get the chance to try it again.

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