

# Review: 'The Partner Track'

By Julie L. Kessler

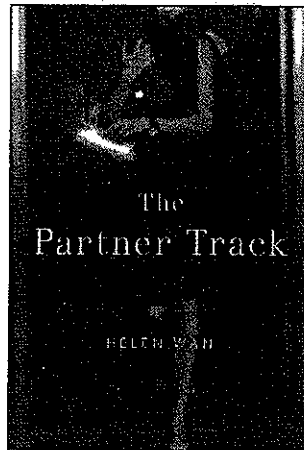
In "The Partner Track" — a smart, engaging and well-written debut novel — attorney Helen Wan provides a plane-trip-perfect ride for those who have worked in our nation's big law firms, those who have wondered what it might be like to do so, and those whose spines are strong enough to withstand the wild whiplash of fictionalized truth-telling.

## Culture Commentary

From the perspective of the fictional Parsons Valentine & Hunt LLP, an enormous, old-boy New York law firm, protagonist Ingrid Yung is a "two-fer," a young, highly credentialed, hard-working and talented Chinese-American attorney. The smart and able-to-game-play Yung is being groomed to become partner and has made all of the right moves — from billing an insanity-inducing number of hours to schmoozing just enough to avoid brown nosing and playing on the firm's softball team. She is doing the fox trot and it looks as though Yung will dance right through the glass ceiling and be voted into the firm. That is, until the 11th hour, when a series of carefully orchestrated events by others in the firm triggers her downward spiral from the firm's "Golden Girl" to a lawyer being escorted out of the firm's luxe offices by beefy building security.

I am not Chinese-American, but as a young attorney born to immigrant parents, I worked in a large Honolulu firm that was almost entirely Asian and virtually all male; there was neither a single female partner nor even a female senior associate who could act as a mentor. I also worked for several years at two large New York law firms which, of course, did have some women partners and senior associates. However, finding mentors willing to commit to the concept of mentoring was often as much of a challenge as Wan correctly portrays in "The Partner Track."

Indeed, much of what Wan has written is, for this reader, utterly relatable, though some of this material might seem a tad cliché — from the "Chinglish" conversations Ingrid has with her mother, who constantly asks when will Ingrid find time to date, to encounters with "big swaggering suits" who assume that because she was female she must be a secretary. Wan's descriptions of the emotional roller coaster these events



trigger and how the protagonist deals with the consistent and often unwitting slights by colleagues, management and clients is spot-on. (If I live to be 110, I will never forget my first solo court appearance as a first-year attorney, on a TRO in Honolulu, the file for which I had received a half-hour before the hearing, as the partner had unexpectedly been called away. When I swung open the door from the gallery to counsels' tables, the defense counsel loudly insisted I be seated either in the stenographer's chair or in the gallery. Such lame attempts at humiliation now seem utterly laughable, but of course at the time they were thoroughly destabilizing. As it happened, my firm's client's TRO was granted and — just by accident, of course — the swinging door swung firmly into defense counsel's knee on my way out.)

There are also several laugh-out-loud moments in "The Partner Track." Ingrid describes the intense competition for the brass ring with its attendant pissing matches among the partner track climbing attorneys, and how one senior associate "upped the ante for all of us by missing the birth of his first child in order to take a deposition." Pretty hard to top that. To those outside the profession it may seem impossible, but all of us who have worked at the big firms have stories similar to these from our early years.

The novel contains so many exact and relatable descriptions from Yung's day-to-day working life that it often appears that Wan is writing a book of universal truths about every young woman practitioner of the day, and especially those of immigrant stock. Perhaps one of the best aspects of Wan's writing is that the country of origin and ethnicity was completely irrelevant to the story line. Some of the descriptions will be eerily familiar

to many women lawyers from an immigrant background, Asian or otherwise. In one scene, Ingrid describes her first meeting with a sexist and racist CEO of a Fortune 500 client whose mega-million dollar deal she has just been assigned, and the CEO talks to the senior partner about her as if she is not in the room. "When you said on the phone that Ingrid Yung would be handling our deal, I expected some sour-faced old fraulein. Believe me I'd rather work with a pretty young Asian gal any day." Yes, it happens. More often than anyone in our profession would actually care to admit.

Wan also perfectly captures the internal conflicts of being the offspring of immigrants, the first American born and educated, and the first to go to law school (and certainly not for an MRS degree), and the corresponding drive for success, the very genesis of which is a desire to protect oneself and one's parents from unwitting danger seemingly everywhere. She also courageously touches on the very reasons why potential women mentors, especially those from minority groups, have such difficulty extending a hand to assist those who come after.

Helen Wan has done in "The Partner Track" what every writer dreams of: written a marvelous debut novel that seeks to educate and enlighten with entertainingly page-turning prose that any reader will enjoy. She has done this in spades, with talent, finesse and style. Wan has spun a great yarn with enough suspense and fast-paced drama that I wouldn't be at all surprised if "The Partner Track" gets optioned for the silver screen. Stay tuned.

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