



BY WRITERS  
**FAMOUS &  
OBSCURE**

EDITED BY  
**LARRY  
SMITH**

FROM  
THE *NEW YORK TIMES*  
BEST-SELLING  
**SIX-WORD  
MEMOIRS  
SERIES**



**KINGSWELL**

Los Angeles • New York

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter in the current political environment, a handful of names have been changed at the request of the authors.

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1101 Flower Street, Glendale, California 91201.

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ISBN 978-1-368-00838-9  
FAC-020093-17202  
Printed in the United States of America  
First Hardcover Edition, September 2017  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Foreword by

# Nahnatchka Khan & Melvin Mar

**I was born in Las Vegas;** both my parents were born in Iran. My family was full of characters: dad, mom, grandfather, aunts, uncles, (I remember one uncle telling us all to call him Panther) . . . and they all helped shaped my sense of humor. For me, being a first-generation American, coming from a family of immigrants, it was always important to tell stories from the inside out.

We are telling our story, we are not being told our story. We're not being looked at in a fishbowl, we're looking out at the world through a different lens, with a different perspective. *Fresh Off the Boat* has that same courage. We are confident in who we are, we're not apologizing for it, we're not thankful for it, we own it, we live in it every day. And now is our time to share it. My six words?

**We exist because  
these stories exist.**

—Nahnatchka Khan,  
creator/executive producer, *Fresh Off the Boat*

**My father was the last son to immigrate** to America from China. Our family had a long history with this country dating back to the early days of California. They helped build America, but always felt they weren't a part of America. Growing up, my father told me not to make waves. "Keep your head down, do your work, be respectful. You can never go wrong that way."

In many ways, I think my father was right about the realities of surviving in a new country; that was what it was about for his generation. They did the bravest thing: leaving their home to come for a better life for themselves and their family in America, the land of opportunity. Whether it was working on the railroad, to later generations working in Chinatown kitchens or delivering groceries to those same restaurants, they have been an integral part of America. Being the first generation born here, it's my duty to tell our story and participate in making this country a better place. My six words?

**I owe it to my father.**

—Melvin Mar, executive producer, *Fresh Off the Boat*

**This book is inspired by our audience**, by viewers across the country, across cultures, and across generations. They tell us that in the story of our television family they see reflections of their own families. That the show could resonate so personally is rewarding; that through this collaboration with Six-Word Memoirs it can also be a catalyst for storytelling is exciting.

In the pages ahead are hundreds of stories. We hope you enjoy them and will kick things off with Six-Word Memoirs from our cast and creative team.

*Designed in Asia,  
assembled in California.*

—Ian Chen, “Evan Huang”

*“Where are you from?”  
I’m Irish-Korean.*

—Kourtney Kang, co-executive producer

*Mom's recipes get  
ruined by me.*

–Randall Park, “Louis Huang”

**Thanksgiving dinner  
with samosas  
and turkey.**

–Rachna Fruchbom, coproducer

**I learned Hinduism  
from Urban Outfitters.**

–Sanjay Shah, co-executive producer

**Still amazed  
they let me in.**

–David Smithyman, executive story editor

我的美国梦想实现了。  
My American dream has come true.

—Lucille Soong, “Grandma Huang”

*Warning! Land of Opportunity  
includes “standup.”*

—Sheng Wang, story editor

**Hot pot,  
free to be me.**

—Forrest Wheeler, “Emery Huang”

**My family's  
why I can fly.**

—Hudson Yang, “Eddie Huang”

## Introduction by **Larry Smith**

### **Grounded in Our Roots, We Rise**

**As a young boy,** I used to love walking down the Atlantic City boardwalk with my grandfather, Morris Smith, whom everyone called “Smitty.” Smitty was a small-town pharmacist who immigrated to Philadelphia from Russia in 1914, escaping a war. Just a small boy of four, my grandfather surely didn’t realize his family’s decision to come to America was a lot like so many other American journey stories, both in its simplicity and in its seriousness: they came hoping for a better life.

My grandfather and I never got very far strolling down the boardwalk. He would inevitably run into someone he knew, and we’d spend the whole time swapping stories with friends, old and new. He talked to everyone. One day it dawned on me that Smitty rarely recounted his early days in America. In fact, I really didn’t really know my grandfather’s story—a total “fail” for me as a journalist. So I asked him. He was reticent at first: “My story? Who would be interested in that?”

Once he got talking, he didn’t want to stop. I not only learned about my grandfather’s family history, but I better understood my own place in the world. That’s what a good story can do.



Since that day, I've been on a quest to help people tell, share, and seek stories. In 2006, while running a website with Rachel Fershleiser and Tim Barkow, I found that a surprisingly effective way to seek stories was by asking a simple question: Can you describe your life in six words? The prompt was a personal twist on the legend of Ernest Hemingway's six-word story: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." I saw how wonderful the constraint of six words could be as people responded to this challenge with brief stories that were poignant, memorable, and surprising. Ten years and more than one million six-word stories later, *Six-Word Memoirs* has become a best-selling book series, a popular lesson plan in classrooms, and a tool for self-expression in environments as varied as churches, therapy groups, weddings, and corporate meetings across the world.

*Six Words Fresh Off the Boat: Stories of Immigration, Identity, and Coming to America* is the ninth book in the series, and it brings me all the way back to the start as we ask: Who are we as a nation? How does a family's journey to America tell the story of this country as a whole? These questions have been answered, six words at a time, by recent immigrants and refugees, by descendants of the *Mayflower* and those brought by force on slave ships, and by every generation in between. As always, we've invited a handful of celebrities to share their stories, creating a book with a mix of Emmy, Oscar, and Pulitzer Prize winners

alongside hundreds of people who have never before been published. And while this project, which asks a timeless question about American identity, was conceived before the election of the forty-fifth president of the United States, the unsettling political climate for immigrants that he has ushered in has made the discussions that follow from these stories more vital than ever.

To gather stories for this book, we put out a call for entries on SixWordMemoirs.com and on our social media channels, as did our collaborators at the acclaimed ABC series *Fresh Off the Boat*. We were invited to work with English-language classes for recent immigrants and refugee organizations across the US. We spent time at naturalization ceremonies and among tour groups at Ellis Island. We put down our smartphones, turned to the people next to us while waiting in lines, and asked one simple question: “What’s your story?”

This book is comprised of their answers. The writer and MacArthur “genius” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (who shares her own six words on page 203), has spoken on “the danger of the single story.” The single story, she says, creates stereotypes, resulting in one story being heard as the *only* story. The six-word form, above all, offers a simple, engaging way to let thousands of stories be told within a limited space. Since each story is just six words—whether written by a Tony winner

or a guy named Tony—it's also an egalitarian format that allows many voices to be heard.

Everyone has a story. The sum of our stories is who we are and how we define ourselves as a nation. My grandfather's story—a story of a little boy who escaped Russia with his family during World War I, worked his way through college, opened a small business, became involved in his community, and, ultimately, made life easier for his children—is the American dream. Morris Smith, born Morris Kuznets, came here for a better life. America—at its best—let him.

Larry Smith

June 2017, Columbus, Ohio

**Teachers!** Educators across the world have found Six Words to be a terrific classroom assignment and catalyst for self-expression. Download our free teacher's guide at [sixwordmemoirs.com/fofbguide](http://sixwordmemoirs.com/fofbguide) and engage your students to share their own family stories.

# In 1948, I was a refugee.

—The Honorable Madeleine Albright, sixty-fourth US Secretary of State

*Welcome,  
bienvenue,  
bienvenido,  
欢迎,  
welkom,  
kuwakaribisha.*

—Alexandra S. (age 13)

*Learning English? Easy.  
Learning American: hard.*

—Jeff Yang

EVERY IMMIGRANT'S JOURNEY  
IS TRULY INCREDIBLE.

–Aziz Ansari

**Carried few possessions  
and many dreams.**

–Josephine Collett

Wore our flag on his lapel.

–Lynne Marsak Weinberger

Born Hoiping; died NYC WWII vet.

–Michelle Lu for Hank Honghen Hom, US Army Air Forces

Couldn't comprehend America until I left.

–Amanda Palmer

**Wisconsin winters: colder than my dreams.**

–Neil Gaiman

**TRAVELING BEFORE there was A border.**

–Billy Collins

**We stayed because  
of First Amendment.**

–Molly Jata

Traded rationed  
candy for  
banned books.

–Richard Chen

*From Russia, via Israel, with love.*

–Leonid Oliker

**Thank you for standing  
with humanity.**

–Emanuel Solomon

WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN HERE.  
BLACKFEET NATION.

–Michelle Lowe

Open border via  
Aguaascalientes for steel.

–Ida Sandoval

Bottom of the boat as cargo.

–Takiyah Nur Amin

***I migrated to live  
openly gay.***

–XinFeng Lin

**Saïd Sayrafiezadeh is not  
an immigrant.**

–Saïd Sayrafiezadeh

## First Things First: Find a Bicycle

By Lac Su

**Our family immigrated to Hollywood**, California, in 1978 as Vietnamese refugees. We left everything behind; my parents' wedding rings were the only valuables to make it out with us. My father knew we could adapt to a new life in America with what little we had. With hard work, the possibilities are endless. But . . . first things first. He needed a bicycle to get around until he learned enough English to pass the driver's license test.

Before enrolling my sister and me in school, my father searched local Dumpsters looking for enough bicycle parts to build a complete bike. Within weeks, he found what he needed—even inner tubes—that he patched and reused. For a few years, that red ten-speed bicycle was his prized possession. While other refugees did what they could to get their feet wet in America, my father was already getting his bicycle tires wet—peddling to and from work every day, rain or shine. When the sun was out, I rode with him. He placed me on the bicycle frame in front of him and

**With hard work, the possibilities are endless.**



took me on errands. We went to the liquor store to get cigarettes or pay the utility bills, and if I was lucky, to the grocery store.

One time on his way home from work he decided to explore Los Angeles. He got lost. He didn't read or speak English. He couldn't find his regular route back home—a route that he'd been taking repeatedly for a year. He left work at 6:00 p.m. and didn't get home until the next morning at 9:00 a.m. His explanation to my mother: "Every street and every building in downtown L.A. looked the same. I thought I could remember the landmarks instead of street names, but after a few miles, all the buildings began to look the same."

After a few years of saving, my father bought his first American car—a red 1976 Chevrolet Chevette. Though he passed the driver's license test and could drive around, he didn't. The red car was covered with cloth to protect the paint from the blazing Southern California sun. It was too expensive and beloved to take out regularly. Instead, he continued to ride his bicycle everywhere until it was time to teach me to ride. His red ten-speed soon became mine. Like my father, I learned the ins and outs of the Los Angeles streets by getting lost. Many times.

There was something about riding around L.A. that made me fall in love with America. The most important thing I learned on these

rides: despite all the different people and cultures in Los Angeles, we had one promising thing in common. We were all trying to chase the American dream—one block at a time.

*Lac Su is the author of the award-winning memoir, I Love Yous Are for White People.*

JUST YOUR AVERAGE  
MEXICAN-AMERICAN  
JEWISH-ITALIAN MAYOR.

—Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti