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Susan Choi. Campus novel. Post-9/11 fiction. Moral panic. Profiling. Folk devil.

This article analyzes Susan Choi's *A Person of Interest* (2008) as a work of post-9/11 campus fiction. Personal grudges, hidden motives, and past secrets take on a new dimension in the atmosphere of suspicion, where even a respectable citizen becomes a suspect. The novel serves as a microcosm of the post-9/11 world, portraying a space where the ordinary transforms into a landscape of fear and distrust. By examining it through moral panic theory, the following analysis demonstrates how surveillance invades personal privacy, stripping individuals of their humanity and reducing them to suspects. The protagonist Lee's once private, unremarkable life becomes a spectacle for public scrutiny, with his movements, relationships, and past subjected to relentless investigation.

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Campus novels are a broad, flexible category that integrates many subgenres and themes and reflects diverse cultural and educational landscapes. In contrast, 9/11 and post-9/11 fiction is primarily an American literary development deeply rooted in the nation's recent political history and its collective response to trauma (O'Donnell 2010; Wagner-Martin 2013). Susan Choi's novel *A Person of Interest* (2008) stands out as a unique integration of these genres, blending the universality of campus narratives with the localized, historically grounded themes of post-9/11 fiction. *A Person of Interest* also distinguishes itself thematically from other works within the genre and its American literary contemporaries, such as *Blue Angel* (2000) by Francine Prose, *The Human Stain* (2000) by Philip Roth, or *Real Life* (2020) and *The Late Americans* (2023) by Brandon Taylor. These novels have distinct identitarian and ideological slants, typical for American fiction of the last 50 years. Though Choi's novel is not an exception in this respect, the writer reaches beyond rewarding and politically appropriate motifs. *A Person of Interest* is a post-9/11 campus novel and a psychological drama that blends personal and political narratives and reflects the anxieties of an increasingly surveillance-driven and fear-stricken society. The writer uses the backdrop of a university campus to explore issues of identity, suspicion, and guilt in the wake of a local traumatic event that mirrors the psychological and sociopolitical landscape of post-9/11 America. Through Professor Lee's experience, the novel discusses themes of paranoia, racial prejudice, and the loss of trust, reflecting the heightened fear and suspicion that characterized the period following the attacks of September 11, 2001. The characters' occupation makes their life choices and challenges ethically challenging and emotionally poignant.

A Person of Interest is not Choi's only novel exploring various aspects of American university life. Academia is one of her favorite subjects, and she revisits it in her novels *My Education* (2014) and *Trust Exercise* (2019). Even though we cannot label them as campus fiction, a university/school setting and characters connected with academia are crucial for their plots. In *A Person of Interest*, a university, which is a setting typically associated with intellectual freedom, diversity, and the pursuit of truth, becomes a scene of violence – an explosion in Professor Hendley's office kills a young and famous mathematician. The bomb arrived with mail addressed to this utterly unpolitical person admired by students and colleagues, except for Lee, whose life is profoundly altered by the bombing. The unexpected attack and Hendley's death make Lee, a 65-year-old Asian-American professor of mathematics, look back at his personal dramas, unhappy relations, betrayals, jealousy, and professional unfulfillment.

In Choi's novel, echoes of the "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski's story are evident. However, the socio-historical context of *A Person of Interest* is distinctly different, shaping how this narrative is approached. Choi was familiar with Kaczynski's case because her father, Chang Choi, a mathematics professor at Indiana University South Bend, followed it closely, especially when investigators revealed the bomber's identity. Choi's father was shocked to discover that Kaczynski was the "antisocial genius from his Michigan doctoral program with whom he had exchanged notes and shared desk space" (Valby 2008). Theodore "Ted" Kaczynski was a once-brilliant mathematician

who studied at Harvard and Michigan, taught at Berkeley, then became a recluse in Montana. He first came to the FBI's attention in 1978 when a rudimentary home-made bomb detonated at a university in Chicago. Over the next 17 years, he sent or delivered a series of increasingly sophisticated bombs, ultimately killing three people and injuring nearly two dozen others. Kaczynski's actions instilled widespread fear and panic, including threats to target airplanes in flight. It took a special FBI-led task force almost 17 years to identify and apprehend the Unabomber (UNABOM being the case code name, standing for "University and Airline Bombing") (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2024).

The character of Donald Whitehead, a bomber, is inspired by Kaczynski. He, too, is a brilliant mathematician who works at Berkeley after earning his degree and later retreats to a hermit's life. However, Choi does not create a direct prototype of the terrorist of the 1980s–1990s. Whitehead is a flat character whose role serves "little more than a pretext, a device that allows Choi to stage Lee's inner chaos against the spectacular backdrop of an FBI manhunt and the inevitable media circus that the case attracts" (Gibbons n.d., n.p.). In short, Whitehead's role in the novel is to launch a retrospective "Redemption Machine" for Lee. This is part of James Gibbons's criticism of Choi's use of the Unabomber's case. The critic's point is valid, though Choi did not intend to focus on Whitehead's history, or explore his moral and psychological disintegration. As she mentioned in one of her interviews, people like Kaczynski are "stultifying", while those "being dragged along in their wake, the people whose lives they've destroyed – they can be riveting" (Newberger 2008, n.p.). Her sympathy lies with Lee and the disintegration of his personality amid the post-9/11 atmosphere of moral panic and suspicion, which profoundly affects his life, the academy, and interpersonal relationships.

Choi deliberately does not give her protagonist a first name – he is just Lee. Nor does she specify his ethnicity. He speaks Japanese and spent his childhood near an unidentified ocean, so we may assume he is Japanese or Chinese, but the writer does not identify the country of his origin. Giving him probably one of the most common Asian last names, Choi underscores the typicality of his situation: "I'd decided I didn't want to be specific about Lee's ethnicity, and so I needed something generic for his name that didn't paint me into a corner. Lee did the trick for a last name, but then I couldn't hit on an equally generic first name. And after a while I liked the sound of his just being 'Lee'" (Newberger 2008, n.p.).

The explosion of the bomb next door and the unexpected elimination of Lee's rival expose his deeply hidden grudges and jealousy:

> The bomb and Lee's terrible gladness: that something was damaging Hendley because Hendley made Lee feel even more obsolete and unloved. It had been the gross shock of realizing that he felt glad that had brought him to sitting, from being curled on the floor, and that had nailed his gaze emptily to the opposite wall. He was deep in disgusted reflection on his own pettiness when the bomb squad found him. (Choi 2008, 9)

Lee finds himself under suspicion, partly because of his awkward attitude (he does not visit Hendley in the hospital, never asks anyone about his condition, and skips the memorial service) but also due to his status as an outsider and of Asian origin.

His alienation, which primarily has psychological and cultural roots, is tied to his ethnic background and a deep social inferiority complex, which Lee has experienced ever since he found himself in the USA:

> Jealousy had stained much of Lee's life [...]. As a young man, before emigrating, he'd never experienced any of the circumstances that might have aroused that emotion. His had been, initially, an exceptionally privileged family. Then they had fallen. [...] [T]he anguish of being a fallen aristocrat, or as much of a fallen aristocrat as your nation can muster, is a very different anguish from that of envying those better off. His family had only their past selves to envy, and envy was not what they felt; they mourned their past selves as if they'd been cut down by death. Lee felt fierce love for the naïve and arrogant young man he'd been, and, sometimes, in his immigrant life, this love almost seemed to reanimate that former self, so that to outsiders he seemed both arrogant and remarkably blind to his own circumstances. (15)

With time, Lee's uncertainly, bitterness, and sense of loss transform into psychological insecurity and a feeling of inadequacy, which he tries to conceal: "Lee modeled himself on the Byronic octet, not without some success; his ink-dark, almost mirrorlike hair grew to fall in a cowlick that hid his forehead; he found a battered calf briefcase, like a WASPy, neglected heirloom, in a secondhand store" (17–18). Lee's academic career, while consistent, remains relatively unremarkable, and little is known about it. It is all connected with the same school where he became a member of the academic community that got used to him, even when, as the reader may conclude, he did not feel entirely at home because of the old grudges of the past.

The unnamed university where the novel's action takes place is located in a Midwestern town in the Rust Belt, and is the town's single distinguishing element. Otherwise, it is "grey and enfeebled", and young people are leaving it or succumbing to drug use. A division of the town into the "gown" and "nongown" parts means a clear social gap. For Lee, a house in the "gown" part lost its appeal long ago. He is as bitter about it as about everything else in his personal and academic life:

> Lee no more felt a kinship to these town geriatrics than he would have to horses or cows. Academic life demanded that reflexive belief in exemption from sorry surroundings, as if being a tenured professor at a second-rate school were like being an American diplomat in the Third World. [...] But what if twenty-five years in the same place had filled with time's silt the dividing abyss, so that now Lee was less a grand Gownsman than another old Townsman who should give up his license? (85)

The provincial university is a micro-replica of the post-9/11 world, where the ordinary suddenly transforms into something suspicious. The bombing, while not directly related to international terrorism, evokes a sense of terror and reflects the national atmosphere following 9/11:

> Outdoors, spring had been sweetly indifferent to the disasters of man, but from this vantage the budding branches Lee saw appeared frozen in postures of horror. It must be the youth of this building, Lee thought; not enough had transpired here for the palimpsest theory to work. From its cold lobby tile to its dirty skylights, the place was all about Hendley. (39)

MARTA KOVAL

The campus is no longer a safe space – the FBI scrutinizes the incoming mail and faculty IDs are checked. Mistrust and heightened security permeate the academic environment, and everyone seems a potential suspect. This atmosphere on campus and in the town becomes a favorable environment for the spread of moral panic.

This concept, introduced by the sociologist Stanley Cohen in 1972, refers to widespread fear that something poses a profound threat to the values and interests of society. The scholar notes in the *Introduction* to the third edition of his *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* that almost half a century later, the term did not lose its significance: "Calling something a 'moral panic' does not imply that this something does not exist or happened at all and that reaction is based on fantasy, hysteria, delusion and illusion or being duped by the powerful. [...] This labeling derives from a wilful refusal by liberals, radicals and leftists to take public anxieties seriously" (2011, vii). While Cohen relies on a conservative perspective rooted in traditional values, moral panic is not an ideological concept. It is politically neutral and can be used in cases that support diverse political perspectives (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009; Jenkins 1992; Whitlock 1979). Cohen and his followers use the concept to explain manipulation with a sense of collective social safety, which frequently supports political profiling and discrimination.

Moral panic rises when "folk devils" or deviants create a new and refurbished evil, "wreaking havoc on the decent, honest members of the society at large" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 33). Goode and Ben-Yehuda note that folk devils "provide authoritative concepts capable of rendering situations meaningful by constructing suasive images by which meaning can be sensibly grasped and which can arouse emotions and direct mass actions toward objectives which promise to resolve existing strain" (27). After 9/11, terrorists became a standard and very convenient version of folk devils as a personification of evil and agents "responsible for the threatening or damaging behavior or condition" (27). Indeed, the emergence of a new folk devil did not eliminate others, like drug dealers, child molesters, juvenile delinquents, etc. However, the locus of moral panic is of crucial importance (43), and "while some of the actions taken as a result of a moral panic are society-wide in their impact or implications – federal laws, for instance – they are always the product of what specific individuals or members of specific groups do" (43). Therefore, post-9/11 folk devils are a specific American cultural and social product, which makes Choi's novel a thematically unique text that integrates terrorism-induced moral panic into campus fiction.

Moral panic is directed against an assumed threat and makes the social actors combat it, "often transmitting rumor and occasionally falling victim to mass delusion about it" (33). Media and political rhetoric often amplify moral panics, which identify certain groups or behaviors as dangerous or deviant and, as a result, pressure governments and institutions to take action, often through policies involving political profiling and surveillance. Although Lee does not establish a new category of folk devil, his behavior and relationships align well with the prevailing atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty and the emergence of moral panic on campus and in the town.

In the post-9/11 context, the moral panic surrounding terrorism led to an increase in state-sanctioned profiling of Muslim and Middle Eastern communities: "In the United States, two common though false narratives about terrorists who attack America abound. We see them on television, in the movies, on the news, and, currently, in the Trump administration. The first is that 'terrorists are always (brown) Muslims'. The second is that 'white people are never terrorists'" (Corbin 2017, 455). This panic-inducing approach is fueled by sensationalist media coverage and political rhetoric that portrays these communities as inherently linked to terrorism, reinforcing public fear and justifying the expansion of political profiling programs.

Experts at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University prepared a report analyzing troubling political programs introduced during the Obama and Trump administrations. These programs perpetuated the perception of individuals of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Arab descent, as well as Muslims more broadly, as "presumed national security threats" (Crawford, Graves, and Katzenstein 2023, n.p.). They targeted these communities with mass surveillance, eroded privacy and individual liberties, and reinforced Islamophobic and xenophobic public narratives. The authors of the report point out that these programs heightened the visibility of Muslims and individuals of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Arab descent, not only through government initiatives but also in interactions with neighbors, the media, and workplaces. As a result, these communities have frequently been subjected to violence, intimidation, vandalism, and hate crimes, particularly in the years following 9/11. While the overall number of reported hate crimes declined by over 18% between 2000 and 2009, incidents targeting Muslims surged by more than 500 percent. Anti-Muslim activities – including hate crimes targeting mosques and Islamic centers, media coverage of anti-Muslim violence, and discriminatory actions or statements by public officials – significantly escalated starting in late 2015. Assaults against Muslims in the U.S. reached a peak of 127 cases in 2016 (Crawford, Graves, and Katzenstein 2023, n.p.). While President Joe Biden revoked Trump's discriminatory orders targeting citizens from predominantly Muslim countries, the criminalization and mass surveillance of racialized groups, including Muslims, Arabs, and Latinx immigrant communities, have persisted without significant reduction. This situation led to the frequent and ongoing emergence of moral panics nationwide, and American academia was not immune to them.

Moral panic is a hybrid product that integrates justified experience-based anxieties, fear of the unknown, and hysteria prompted by the media's desire to create a sensation. After 9/11, Americans attempted to cope with their fear and uncertainty by assigning blame and identifying a clear enemy. This process was facilitated by moral panic, which not only heightened collective anxieties and created, or rather, deepened a division within society, separating individuals into categories of "them" and "us," deviants and law-abiding citizens (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 33). The fear of "otherness" is not a novel concept. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said explores how the West constructs the "Other" as inherently different, threatening, and inferior. While Said's work predates 9/11, its framework applies to post-9/11 discourse, particularly examining how fear of "otherness" became amplified and institutional-

ized. The problem is that Lee is not only an American citizen. He perceives himself as American and his self-identity does not require confirmation. Nothing in his behavior or attitude has ever indicated a lack of loyalty towards the American state. His unnamed home country exists only in his sentimental memories, which belong to his past and early immigrant years. However, in post-9/11 America, Lee's strangeness and isolation suddenly become connected with his ethnic background and become a source of hostility, which is one of the essential elements of moral panic (Cohen 2011, xxvi). Lee's racial and ethnic background, combined with his nonsocial behavior, are appropriate for channeling the community's fear. *A Person of Interest* highlights how the fear of "otherness" became pervasive after 9/11 and how individuals who fit the mold of foreignness, even tangentially, could be implicated in acts of terror simply by association. The effects of such suspicion and moral panic were damaging to the targeted individuals like Lee and the larger social fabric as they ruined the valuable atmosphere of trust and collaboration, which is so important in academia.

Moral panic and the power of profiling also affect the insulated academic community, which, although politically and culturally sensitive, is expected to exhibit a higher degree of common sense than the rest of society. Although Lee is neither Muslim nor Middle Eastern, he suddenly becomes "other", i.e., an alien, due to his Asian heritage, and this difference becomes a point of suspicion. Despite being a longstanding member of the university community, he turns into an outsider, and his foreignness and emotional coldness influence the assumption of his guilt. Lee's race and immigrant background change into proxies for danger in the eyes of those around him. His colleagues, many of whom have known him for years, quickly distance themselves from him once he is labeled a suspect. Choi's novel offers a fictional illustration of Judith Butler's concern, which she articulates very clearly in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004). She criticizes how fear and grief in the aftermath of 9/11 were mobilized to justify suspicion, profiling, and exclusion of those perceived as foreign or non-American, i.e., "the other". Lee becomes someone who, by mere association with "otherness", was implicated in violence and subjected to isolation and subsequent dehumanization.

Lee and we, as readers, observe how the college is filled with rumors and gossip, and the atmosphere is becoming too tense to endure and impossible to ignore: the dead silence in class, colleagues' constant elusiveness, even cars in the parking lot seem to avoid closeness to his. Rumors implicating Lee in the terrorist bombing and moral panic they intensify become a pretext to justify removing Lee from campus. Dean Littell appears to be aware that acting on gossip is not a good option. Still, he admits that hysteria connected with Lee and rumors associated with him discredit the Department: "It looks like I don't have any choice but to act on the rumors' effects, and it's gotten to where I've had the TV news people all over the campus this morning. Which brings it all back to student welfare" (Choi 2008, 194). He suggests (actually orders) that Lee take a semester off and move away from the town. The dean's proposal expresses consensus as a "widespread agreement (not necessarily total) that the threat exists, is serious, and that 'something should be done'" (Cohen 2011, xxvii).

The dean's proposal is not simply an attempt to push Lee into quasi-retirement but the result of irrelevant and disproportionate suspicion that daily acquires a frightening form. Cohen refers to disproportionality as an "exaggeration of the number or strength of the cases, in terms of the damage caused, moral offensiveness, potential risk if ignored" (xxvii). Rumors of harm, whether fabricated or genuinely believed, contribute to its enhancement. In a small and relatively isolated community like a provincial university, the role of rumors, even when they lack substantiation, cannot be underestimated: "If many […] such rumors or tales or legends circulate about a particular issue in specific social circles, that may indicate that something significant, something very much like a moral panic, is about to launch" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 45). Following Hendley's death, anxiety and tension at the university and in the town escalate, and Lee's behavior becomes "rumorgenic" (Choi 2008, 131). Academia in Choi's novel is not only prone to moral panic, which taps into underlying racial and cultural anxieties. We may assume it tends to be more susceptible to rumors and suspicion than other institutions because it operates under the belief that it is uniquely special. Choi knows it from her life experience: her father was a math professor, so as a child, she could closely observe university life and personal relations. As the writer points out in one of the comments, "[t]he pedagogical relationship is inherently interesting because there's so much unresolved tension. In certain creative contexts there's an active erasure of that power differential – we're artistic people, special people, unconventional. All of those rules and structures don't apply to us. It can end up wonderful or it can end up dangerous" (Jordan 2020, n.p.). While Lee is struggling with uncertainty, a sense of being lost, guilt, and ghosts of the past, the university community, overwhelmed by anxiety, treats rumors as verified facts. For convenience, it appears willing to accept subjective impressions and opinions as sufficient grounds to determine Lee's fate.

Suspicion affects all areas of Lee's everyday life. His home seems to be searched in his absence while his once-friendly neighbors become self-appointed prosecutors. They remember that Lee was "unusual" and once even slammed the door in a neighbor's face. Routine incidents and attitudes are exaggerated and charged with hidden meaning. The neighbors accompany the journalists, and when they crowd at Lee's door and start banging at it, he is virtually paralyzed with fear. We observe a transformation of an intelligent, skeptical, though misanthropic individual of a relatively high social status into a frightened and dumb creature unable to communicate his needs.

Lee's experience reflects the broad racial profiling that many Muslim and South Asian Americans faced in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The authorities, University colleagues, and neighbors quickly latch onto Lee as a suspect, reflecting the ease with which individuals who appear different – not only racially or culturally but also behaviorally – can become targets of suspicion. However, Choi does not allow for such a simplified novel reading. Lee's background makes him an easy target, but even the most common things, like students' grades or arguments between colleagues, acquire an exaggerated significance in the atmosphere of general suspicion. Sondra, the Department's secretary, finally dares to mention to Lee how others see and interpret his attitudes:

> [A]ll I want to say is – is it true you weren't at the memorial? [...] You know, all of us in the department, we all sat together. And no one could find you. [...] It didn't look right. And after you were on TV, speaking so well. And then not at the service at all. And these FBI people are asking about the department, and sometimes they just ask about you. And everybody remembers those fights you and Hendley would have – [...] Lee, last week when I asked you to go to the grief counselor, [...] you said something I thought was very strange. You said, "I am the last person you ought to be nice to," or something like that. Why did you say that, Lee? What did you mean? (2008, 172)

It is not only the words and past arguments that acquire a different meaning. Lee notices someone moved things in his university office and home study. He senses "the malevolent interference". The atmosphere for him seems to become thick, inexplicable, and filled with a hunch: "Lee sat gripping the arms of his chair and bending a furious gaze on the objects he cherished, as if they'd betrayed him" (173). Even a scientist whose profession is grounded in pragmatism and logic can be deeply affected by alleged surveillance. Lee begins to perceive things that are not there, growing suspicious of the people around him, their words, and their actions. His behavior starts to shift, appearing increasingly paranoid and even hysterical. The more Lee loses emotional and psychological balance, the more suspicious he becomes – if not for the FBI people, then for his colleagues and neighbors. His mathematical mind is helpless in the face of panic-induced suspicion.

One of the most compelling aspects of *A Person of Interest* is its exploration of guilt and innocence, both on a personal and societal level. Lee is innocent of the crime he is suspected of, but he is not entirely without guilt in other areas of his life. He harbors profound feelings of regret and failure, both as a father and a colleague, and his troubled relationships with Aileen, his daughter Esther, and Hendley amplify his sense of isolation and internal guilt. Choi creates a complex emotional landscape where questions of complicity and moral responsibility often merge. Lee's status as a "person of interest", which for most means a suspect, forces him to confront how others see him and his self-perception. His long-standing alienation, a sense of inferiority, and his fraught relationships with his women and colleagues surface with new strength after the bombing and subsequent investigation. The latter turns him, a rational and well-organized person, into a trapped creature who has no choice left:

> "You both should believe me!" Lee was only remotely aware that his temples were streaming with sweat – his mind was cornered and panicked. [...] He no longer knew how he'd gotten here or what sense it made, only that his survival relied on persuading this obdurate man. "I am telling you the truth –"
> "If that's the case, then would you like to take a polygraph?" Morrison said.
> "A lie-detector test implies the person being tested is suspect," Lee said after a moment. [...] He felt offended to the core. At the same time, he still was a prisoner of panic. The panic interfered with his indignation: it would soon deplete it. (179–180)

Although Lee does not face any direct charges, his communication with the FBI agents shows how, in the post-9/11 climate, the integrity of individuals and communities is questioned or reshaped in light of new fears and biases.

The FBI's investigation into the bombing brings intense scrutiny upon Lee's personal life, and he finds himself living under the constant watch of law enforcement

and the media. The sense of being surveilled, of having one's privacy invaded, is symbolic of the broader experience after 9/11 when government surveillance programs like the Patriot Act of 2001 expanded, and citizens became more accustomed to the idea of living under watchful eyes.

The loss of privacy and the expansion of state power in the name of national security enhanced public panic and individual vulnerability. Once private and unremarkable, Lee's life becomes a spectacle for general consumption, and his movements, relationships, and past are subject to investigation. The dehumanizing effects of this kind of scrutiny show how surveillance not only invades personal privacy but also strips individuals of their humanity, reducing them to mere suspects. Even though there is no evidence linking Lee to the crime, his background, social isolation, and personal dislike of Hendley become enough for the FBI to pursue him as a suspect.

Lee's situation reflects the broader American trend of law enforcement targeting individuals from specific racial and ethnic backgrounds, especially in the context of terrorism investigations. A sense of risk is integrated into a broader culture of insecurity, victimization, and fear (Cohen 2011, xxx–xxxi). In Lee's case, his status as a naturalized foreigner in a predominantly white academic environment makes him an easy scapegoat, even though the real threat lies elsewhere.

The novel explores the impact of institutionalized political profiling and shows how prejudice operates in the private sphere, affecting relationships and community dynamics. Once the FBI begins investigating Lee, the academic community around him changes; colleagues who once saw him as harmless, if eccentric, now avoid him, and neighbors treat him with suspicion, if not hostility. Prejudice can spread quickly, even in a community that, by definition, should be critical and resistant to outside pressure. The shift in how those around Lee perceive him illustrates the connections between public accusations and private biases.

Lee's feelings of alienation are not solely the result of external prejudice. His internalized sense of inadequacy and failure as a father, husband, and colleague compound them. The novel examines how prejudice, once internalized, can lead to self-sabotage and isolation as Lee comes to embody the very outsider status that others project onto him. This internalization of prejudice is a subtle yet powerful theme in the novel. Choi suggests that living under constant pressure – whether due to race, ethnicity, or political climate – can profoundly impact an individual's sense of self. Lee is not a likable character, but his situation evokes sympathy. He becomes a symbol for the many who, like him, must live in a society that views them through a lens of cultural superiority. Even though Lee is, of course, innocent of the bombing, his behavior and attitudes sometimes appear evasive or guilty. Choi uses this ambiguity to highlight how political profiling erodes the presumption of innocence. For Lee, the process of clearing his name becomes all-consuming, and the stress and humiliation of being investigated leave him psychologically scarred. Even though the bombing mystery is eventually solved, the experience permanently alters Lee's life.

A Person of Interest crafts a nuanced portrait of life in the shadow of fear and suspicion, using the campus novel framework to explore broader themes related to post-9/11 America. The novel's depiction of paranoia, racial prejudice, surveillance, and

the fragility of trust reflects the psychological and social aftershocks of the 9/11 attacks. Through Lee's character, Choi examines how these forces shape individual lives, often with devastating consequences, and erode community bonds and intellectual freedom ideals. *A Person of Interest* stands as a powerful reminder of the human cost of living in a society governed by fear where even the most insulated spaces – like university campuses – can be transformed by the traumas of the wider world.

Comparatively, the campus novels mentioned at the beginning of the article – Francine Prose's *Blue Angel*, Brandon Taylor's *Real Life*, and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* – also discuss identity and societal conflict within academic settings. However, Choi's work extends beyond the individual struggles of its protagonist to explore the collective moral panic that defined the early 21st century. While *The Human Stain* examines race and personal reinvention and *Blue Angel* critiques academic power dynamics, Choi focuses on the post-9/11 surveillance culture, linking personal biases and weaknesses to broader societal anxieties.

In *A Person of Interest*, Choi captures the toxic impact of moral panic where a character like Lee, already struggling with alienation and self-doubt, becomes an accessible target for the community succumbing to hysteria and fear. The novel asks readers to confront the fragile boundaries between personal integrity and public judgment, making Lee's history a poignant exploration of post-9/11 American consciousness.

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