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Two months after the English version of *Ball Lightning* hit the international book market in August, sci-fi writer Liu Cixin headed for the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany.

There, following the fair, Liu met with fans and gave speeches and interviews — at a university, in an old coal mine, and at several more venues across four German cities — over the course of a week. According to local reports, he was received enthusiastically, as the second book of his *Three Body* trilogy, *The Dark Forest*, was hot off the press after its German-language release.

This time, however, along with his critically acclaimed trilogy — which contains *The Three Body Problem*, *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End* — Liu is armed with another recently translated novel about tragedy, obsession and cutting-edge weapons.

The story begins on Chen's 14th birthday, when his parents are killed in front of him, turned to ash after being hit by ball lightning.

In college, Chen makes it his life's mission to uncover the mysteries of the natural phenomenon, trying to figure out the mathematical pattern behind its random occurrence and movements.

Isolating himself from the world, he puts everything into pursuing his obsession. His research leads him to Lin Yun, an army major who — driven by the death of her mother on the battlefield when she was just a child — shares his fascination with the phenomenon, but with the ambition to channel its energy to create a deadly weapon.

The novel left a lot of space for contemplation and interpretation about what happens when the pursuit of knowledge runs up against the drive to harness new discoveries with no consideration of their possible consequences.

Publishers Weekly said of *Ball Lightning*: "Readers intrigued by cutting-edge and slightly speculative science, and the philosophy of scientific ethics, will want to pick up this fine novel."

Liu told *China Daily* before he left Beijing for Frankfurt that even he cannot tell his true intention for the story: the magnificent science, the ethics, the childhood psychoanalysis, or its views on the army and war.

He maintains the attitude that "it's better for writers to hide behind their work", because as he was quoted previously: "One more explanation will block one more way for the readers to imagine. I don't explain to appeal; I just speak about what I truly feel and see."

In fact, Liu records in the afterword of *Ball Lightning* that he personally witnessed the rarely seen natural phenomenon in 1982 in Central China's Henan province, and ever since has found himself accumulating a lot of fanciful ideas about it.

For Liu, however, rarer still in China in the 1980s were Chinese

Cracking open space and time

English translation of the prequel to sci-fi storyteller Liu Cixin's *Three Body* trilogy is already proving a hit



Writer Liu Cixin (seated right) meets fans during a recent trip to Germany. CHEN FENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

translations of the works of Arthur C. Clarke. Even though several years had passed since China's reform and opening-up began, "fewer than one in tens of thousands" had read the books that would shape Liu's own writing and pave the way for his *Three Body* trilogy.

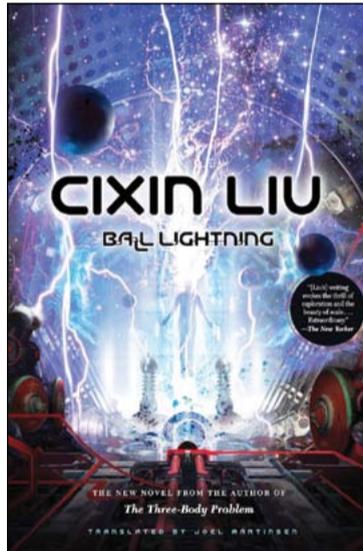
Ball Lightning, first published in 2004, is considered to be a prequel, with several key characters from the trilogy making an appearance.

The novel differs from the *Three Body* trilogy in that the latter is a manifesto of Liu's ideal of creating something based on a combination of imagining the very grand and the very tiny — or based on the idea of something being imagined out of nothing.

However, Liu said, "*Ball Lightning* was my trial, creating one part of what I craved as a whole, because the readers, then, were not ready for the latter."

Ten years later, many readers have found themselves obsessed with *Three Body*'s grand storytelling.

Liu's foreign readers also know him well. Oregon-based writer and editor Erik Henriksen said in his review of *Ball Lightning*: "As usual, Liu is a master at evoking awe and horror at the scale and strangeness of our universe — but here, he also lays bare why we study it. He's more interested in, and better at, cracking open the big ideas of space and time."



The English version of Liu's *Ball Lightning* hit the global book market in August.

Bloomberg published a report under the headline "China uses sci-fi to try to spark a tech boom" after meeting Liu at the World Conference on Science Literacy in Beijing in late September.

According to Yao Haijun, editor of *Science Fiction World*, there are 80 million sci-fi readers in the country, while there were only about 200 sci-fi writers in 2016.

As a comparison, Yao also said that China published just 5 percent of the volume of sci-fi titles published in

the United States, where 1,797 writers were active in the genre between 2011 and 2016.

Liu said the core of his novels is sci-fi fantasy; less important elements are stories and characters.

He used to sit for long hours, contemplating new ideas or constructing his stories. Now, in recent years, he is able to get in touch with — and discuss things with — more scientists.

"Science fiction writers may consider many angles on a subject, but they always choose to write about the least likely," he says in the afterword. "It's the seemingly unlikeliest of the possibilities in science fiction stories that tend to become reality. So, in the end, who knows?"

Lindsey Hall, senior editor at Tor/Forge Books, the US publisher of Liu's novels, told *China Daily* that *Ball Lightning* is a great read for fans of *The Three Body Problem*, as well as those who have not yet read the trilogy.

"We're very open to working with more Chinese science fiction authors, and the success of *The Three Body Problem* has helped make that possible," Hall said, adding that the company is releasing Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* in English in April.

"The issues Chinese science fiction are confronting are issues we're all facing — questions about the environment, the economy, recycling, how to find family and love and hold

on to your heritage in an ever-changing modern world. These are questions that are felt worldwide, and we hope to continue showcasing the breadth and depth of this rich genre."

Remembrance of Earth's Past, the name of the trilogy released in English-speaking markets, had sold 760,000 copies by the end of last year.

Worldwide, the trilogy has been published in 11 languages and has four more yet to come, making it a global phenomenon. The original Chinese-language version had sold 4 million copies as of July 2016.

Liu said the success of the trilogy was unexpected, and the successful sale of *Ball Lightning* does not mean that a similar miracle will happen again. But, in the six weeks following its release, about 9,000 copies were sold.

Another of Liu's books translated into English is *The Wandering Earth*, a collection of 11 short stories published in October 2017.

As Hall said, Liu has opened a gateway for more Chinese sci-fi writers to reach a wider global audience, but that would not be possible without professionals like Joel Martinsen.

The 40-year-old, Beijing-based American translator worked on *The Dark Forest* and *Ball Lightning*.

"The novel, my favorite by China's most popular science-fiction writer, is one that I've been wanting to translate since I first read it many years ago. I was excited about tackling the challenges posed by the book's inventive physics, and doing justice to its fast-paced story of the pursuit of a scientific obsession," Martinsen said of *Ball Lightning*.

Liu said he has read through Martinsen's version and is satisfied.

Martinsen got a taste of the Chinese language in high school. After getting a bachelor's degree in mathematics from the University of Maryland, he lived in Northeast China's Jilin province for three years before moving to Beijing and enrolling at Beijing Normal University.

He took a job at a media intelligence company before quitting and devoting himself fully to the translation of literature and, sometimes, film subtitles.

Besides Liu's novels, he has translated works by Zhang Wei and Han Han.

"I feel familiar with many scenes depicted in *Ball Lightning* — the streets in Beijing and even the top of Taishan Mountain," Martinsen said, adding that the challenges lie in rendering the scientific terms and phrases with precision.

Liu considers himself a "sci-fi fan turned writer". He majored in hydropower engineering at North China University of Water Resources and Electric Power before working as an engineer at a power plant in Yangquan, in North China's Shanxi province, for 30 years. He left the plant in 2014 to join the local federation of literary and art circles.

In Yangquan, "the first place to get internet access in the whole province", Liu's imagination went wild. He created his own worlds "to tell the romantic legends that have unfolded between man and the universe".