Alexander Chee, unmasked; What is identity and how is it forged? How does that answer differ for a half-Korean, half-white gay man such as Chee? The writer behind the essay collection How to Write an Autobiographical Novel lets us in on his continued search for self, Marc Weingarten reports.


Alexander Chee knows what it feels like to be a Mexican wrestler. The novelist and essayist remembers all too well the day a few years ago he decided to don the blue-and-silver mask of the Blue Demon - perhaps the most iconic character in the Lucha Libre universe - and walk around his Brooklyn neighbourhood as if it were his new normal.

"I wondered what it would be like to wear a mask and solve crimes, like Batman," says Chee, 51, currently sweating out the unseasonal April heat while waiting for his panel to start at the Los Angeles Times Book Festival. After an hour or so of wearing the mask, Chee remembers he was starting to have second thoughts. "It felt like a crazy thing to do!" he says. "But to be a superhero wearing a mask means that no self-consciousness is allowed. You just have to keep moving."

Fortunately for Chee, he doesn't have to wear a wrestling mask to try on identities; as a writer, he can do it through his work, which frequently delves into issues of subterfuge and disguise, and how masks reveal as much as they conceal.

In Chee's first collection of essays, How to Write an Autobiographical Novel, the Maine native explores the slippery mutability of identity - as a gay man, an AIDS activist and a young student and writer. In the collection's quietly insistent prose, Chee probes his continuing search for self.

Time and again in these pieces - which explore, among other things, Chee's Brooklyn Rose garden, money angst and writers Annie Dillard (thumbs up) and William F. Buckley (not so much) - Chee circles back to the idea of identity and how it's forged in a culture that is uneasy with a half-Korean, half-white gay man, who, Chee writes, is "allowed neither the privileges of the ruling class nor the community of those who are ruled."

How to Write an Autobiographical Novel is Chee's third book; his 2001 debut novel Edinburgh was a spare, almost pointillist account of child molestation in a boys choir that doubled as a young writer's coming-of-age story - a tricky balancing act that was recognized as the work of a major new talent. His ambitious 2016 novel Queen of The Night is big and brassy, a book written in a major key. A historical novel with a big brain, Queen of The Night's lushly detailed picaresque setting in Second-Empire France won Chee critical accolades and a larger readership.

"I am interested in the idea that celebrity can help you in some way," he says of Queen of the Night's protagonist Lilly Berne, a courtesan turned opera star, but he might also be referring
to himself. "Fame, as I found while writing the book, could make someone from a restricted class with very few rights into something like an equal to a straight white man, given access to privileges that seemed like equality. But only as long as that fame lasts. I think it's still true.

Fame isn't an equalizer but it can do some things."

If Chee can be said to have an overriding preoccupation with public versus private identity, it's partially attributable to his lifelong passion for comic book superheroes.

"I love the idea of alter egos," Chee says, while giving a shoutout to Toronto's comic book store The Beguiled. When it came time in the essays to write about his struggles with an ideal self, he found that unfamiliar aspects of his personality would materialize in the work, as if Chee was using the essay form to excavate the patinated layers of his psyche.

"When you're writing a personal essay, what starts to happen is you come into contact with ideas that you've clung to, and you reject them," Chee says.

"So writing the essays can be like a kind of death. It can be difficult to force yourself into a relationship with this new idea of yourself."

In the essay "Girl," Chee extends the idea of altered selves further when he passes as a woman while dressed in Halloween drag. Paying particular attention to his makeup, he finds that he revels in the power of his transformation. "I am proud for years of the way I looked real that night," he writes. "But mostly I'm still too aware of how that night was the first night I felt comfortable with my face."

Chee remarks that "Girl" was about the "uncanny experience of covering up your identifying features and suddenly being happy with yourself. A lot of us are the person we've agreed to be and you're reluctant to do anything about it. That's what makes masks and dressing up, exciting - you suddenly come into a relationship with some other self. There's lots of ways in which gay culture plays with those different possibilities."

Chee allows that, in the time of Trump, cultural progress has become a lot harder to achieve, particularly when institutional forces are trying to roll back gains made only a scant few years ago. But rather than decry the Great Regression of recent days, Chee prefers to think of it as a temporary aberration.

"It's important to remember that Trump supporters represent a shrinking minority, trying to impose itself on a majority that doesn't necessarily agree with Trump's attitudes." After all, Chee adds, "we went to a Six Flags theme park dressed in drag once and they wouldn't let us in at first. But then all the people wanted their picture taken with us! Drag queens are superheroes, too."