

Contemporary Literature from Singapore

Fiction Titles Recommended
for Translation

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Introduction

Dear Publishers, Editors, Translators & Readers,

On behalf of the National Arts Council Singapore, Litprom – an initiative of Frankfurter Buchmesse – is delighted to present this dossier of contemporary literature from Singapore.

The authors featured in this dossier write in Chinese, English, Malay or Tamil. Some are award-winning and renowned, others are presenting their debuts. Their works of fiction include a variety of novels (historical, speculative, thriller, family saga, among others), a novella, essays and short stories. They follow characters from various backgrounds, struggling with political unrest, war, migration as well as navigating friendships, careers, families and relationships. For instance, a Tamil family preparing for a wedding, senior citizens striving for recognition in unusual ways, neighbours learning to swim in the community pool.

The titles were carefully selected by the National Arts Council Singapore and the Litprom team in collaboration with literary scholars and translators. We would like to thank our literary experts for their contributions.

We cordially invite you to get to know this excerpt of Singapore's contemporary literary scene. Should you consider any of the titles for your publishing list and require further materials and information, please get in touch with us.

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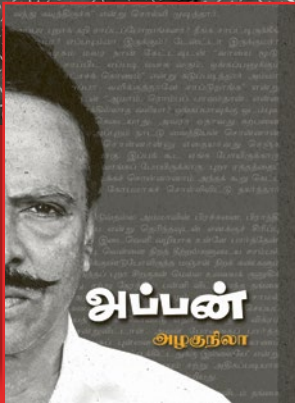
Information on translation funding: nac.gov.sg/support/funding-and-schemes/presentation-and-participation-grant/overview

"Appan"

by Azhagunila



Azhagunila, an author of fiction, nonfiction, and children's literature, has won the Singapore Literature Prize in 2024 and 2022 and was shortlisted in 2020. She has authored two short story collections, three nonfiction volumes, four picture books, a novella for young readers, and two ebooks. She was selected as a writer-in-residence for the National Arts Council – Sangam House Residency (2022–23). She holds a master's degree in Engineering.



Self-published

2023

Tamil

134 pages

978-81-9476-230-0

essays, family, father-daughter-relationship

Recommendation

Summary

"Appan" is a collection of autobiographic anecdotes from the author's life. The stories transport readers into the rhythm of middle-class provincial life growing up in the small village of Pattukottai in Tamil Nadu, India, during the 1970s and 80s. Azhagunila, the author, is the eldest of three children. Her mother, a Tamil teacher at the local school, represents the reasonable, patient and quiet side of the household. She has the dream of building up their own family home. Azhagunila's father is adventurous, impulsive and quick-tempered, yet well respected in his village. After completing high school, he rises from labourer to clerk at the Electricity Board, driven by discipline and the desire to ensure the best education for his children.

The stories touch upon village superstitions, middle-class ambitions, friendships, family conflicts and questions of gender, caste and religion. However, they all share a single, central figure: Azhagunila's father. Sometimes, he is a partner in crime, offering a sip of coconut toddy to his daughter. At other times, he is the good cop who helps the neighbour recover her stolen jewellery or beats up a drunkard who tries to harass his daughter on a bus. On another occasion, he plays the strict disciplinarian and stops young Azhagunila from playing with marbles; her homework was suffering due to excessive playing. Time and again, her father appears as a contradictory figure: strict, quick-tempered and intimidating, yet caring, educated and a lifelong role model for his daughter.

Style and language

Sixteen independent chapters move fluidly across time and space, creating the fragmented, reflective texture of memory. Azhagunila's voice is simple and direct, yet rich with immediacy: local dialects enter her narration through dialogue, infusing it with humour and the earthy feel of village life. At times, the child's viewpoint dominates – for instance, when her father, drinking pigeon blood at the advice

of a Siddha practitioner, looms in her imagination like the guardian deity Veeranar. At other times, the adult author reflects from her new home in Singapore, with both critical distance and affectionate nostalgia, grateful for a life shaped by her father's guidance.

Genre

"Appan" is a literary portrait of the author's relationship with her father. As a memoir, it weaves personal recollection with cultural and familial observation, forming a mosaic of episodes that illuminate both intimate bonds and the rhythms of provincial Tamil life. The narrative continues the tradition of Tamil women's life stories, in which individual experiences, family history and collective memory intertwine. At the same time, it may also be read as a work of diasporic life-writing, suffused with nostalgia and the sensibility of remembering from afar. Perhaps most importantly, Azhagunila highlights a relationship often underrepresented in literature: the complex, formative bond between father and daughter, making it both a personal and culturally resonant exploration.

Anne Mohapatra

"Exile or Pursuit"

by Chia Joo Ming

Born in Singapore in 1959, Chia Joo Ming was the recipient of the Singapore Young Artist Award in 1993 and the Cultural Medallion in 2021. He participated in the Iowa International Writing Program in 1995. His novellas "Reconstructing Nanyang Images", "m40", "Kian Kok" and history nonfiction "The Uncertain Republic: Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore" have been awarded the Singapore Literature Prize. His latest novels include "My Dissociative Memories".



Full House Communications Pte Ltd

2015

Chinese

English translation by Sim Wai Chew
available (Balestier Press)

238 pages

978-981-09-4777-4

coming-of-age, social mobility,
relationships

Recommendation

Summary

The novel "Exile or Pursuit" by Chia Joo Ming offers a multifaceted narrative. It is the coming-of-age story of protagonist Hok Leong and the story of his upward social mobility from periphery to mainstream. The protagonist was born in 1960, not long before Singapore became an independent sovereign state (1965). The juxtaposition of tradition and modernity in Hok Leong's personality mirrors the mentality of modern society in Singapore.

The narrative begins at a middle school in Singapore and ends at a business party in Hong Kong. Hok Leong comes from an under-privileged family. His parents are uneducated, Chinese-speaking immigrants. The family earn their living selling wonton soup on the streets. His social context is shaped by poverty, hard work and violence. It's a life that most want to escape, but don't know how. The feeling of powerlessness and the wish to build a different future dominate Hok Leong's choices as a teenager.

The narrative follows three episodes of the protagonist falling in love with young women during his formative years. The first encounter is with his schoolmate Chiu-yun, a girl from a wealthy Indonesian business family. Through this relationship with her, he is inspired to pursue higher education. However, Hok Leong is painfully aware of the social gap between them, and what it would mean for him in a patriarchal society like Singapore at that time. When Chiu-yun goes to study abroad, Hok Leong cuts off contact with her. Later, during his National Service, he meets Eileen, the sister of his comrade. But Eileen pursues her dream of becoming a model in Hong Kong, an adventure too wild for him. Luckily enough, he finds the ideal life partner: his work colleague, Hsiao-yuan. She is ambitious, but at the same time, she has a very traditional sense of family. They support and encourage one another, pursuing international careers in Taiwan and Shanghai.

The story ends with an unexpected meeting of Hok Leong and Chiu-yun (now called Margaret), who has become the wife of his business partner in Hong Kong. This brings the story full circle – the protagonist has now joined the upper ranks of society. A feat he previously thought impossible.

Style and language

The language style is typical of Singapore. More specifically, it is fluent standard Chinese mixed with English and Malay. The text contains many local as well as other Asian cultural references, including terms from 1970s and 80s popular culture. It offers a rich background for understanding the history and culture of Singapore.

Genre

The narrative structure bears similarities to a theatrical drama in three acts. This novel would be especially intriguing for German-speaking readers, since it emulates the genre of the Bildungsroman, long-popular in German literature, transplanting it to Asia in a fresh new take.

Xiujie Wu

"Fish Birth"

by Sui Ting



He Yingshu, whose pen name is Sui Ting, was born in China and earned her master's degree in Chinese Studies at National University of Singapore (NUS). In 2015, her short story won first prize in the Singapore Golden Point Award and the Singapore Tertiary Chinese Literary Awards. Her first short story collection, "Fish Birth", was shortlisted for the 2020 SLP. Sui Ting is a practicing theatre critic and teaches creative writing at the NUS.



City Book Room

2019

Chinese

187 pages

978-981-1417-48-1

female writing, loneliness,
modern urban life, metamorphism

Recommendation

Summary

Eight stories recount a wide variety of human actions and situations. The eponymous and award-winning story, "Fish Birth", is a dense narrative of disturbing intensity about the self-perception of a young woman who believes that she is giving birth to a fish. The protagonists of the other stories are often female and young. However, "Old Shop", another award-winning story, describes the loss of an old hairdresser's life's work, while the final story, "Autumn Cicada", recounts a young father's frantic search for his two-year-old son. In "Eyes", events from recent history, such as protests against the redevelopment of Bukit Brown Cemetery, provide the backdrop to the protagonist's search for herself. All the stories are set in modern-day Singapore. Many of the protagonists are migrants from the People's Republic of China in search for a better life, as seen in "The Day That Changed Everything". The difficulties experienced by migrants from China are an underlying theme in most of the stories. The author only leaves the island nation once, taking us to a meditation centre in Thailand in the tale "Seven Days of Meditation". Universal themes, such as a mother's willingness to make sacrifices and the pain of lost love, are addressed in "I Am Leaving You" and "Streetwalker", as are the more specific themes mentioned above. Every story is exciting, with unexpected twists and turns. This highly recommended collection provides insights into life in the hectic metropolis of Singapore – without ever becoming tedious.

Style and language

The dichotomy between tradition and modernity is subtly portrayed, with loneliness being a recurring theme for the protagonists in each story. Most of the stories have an open ending, leaving it up to the reader to decide what happens next. Unlikely events are juxtaposed in a way that subverts expectations. Some stories evoke associations with magical realism, leaving us alternately enchanted and disturbed, while the style and language of others correspond to everyday habits. All the stories are written in clear, captivating

language. Although they are written in Standard Chinese, elements of Singaporean Mandarin and social media expressions are incorporated.

Genre

These short stories blend the magical realism genre with allegorical narratives and coming-of-age themes. While not explicitly feminist, many of the stories explore female self-perception and the relationship with one's own body. Body parts and functions are described in explicit detail, yet never in a vulgar or offensive manner. Each story focuses on a single protagonist in one situation, often leading to a turning point and an unexpected ending.

Kathrin Bode

"Flowers at Dawn"

by Singai Ma Elangkannan

Under the pen name Singai Ma Elangkannan, M. Balakrishnan has written six collections of short stories and six novels. His work has been translated into English and Malay, broadcast on national radio and television. A winner of both local and international short story writing competitions, Balakrishnan was the first Tamil writer to receive the S.E.A. Write Award in 1982. He has won the SLP (2004) and Singapore's Cultural Medallion (2005).



Epigram Books

2012

English translation

by A. R. Venkatachalapathy

Original in Tamil "Vaikarai Pookkal"
(self-published)

184 pages

978-981-0735-36-4

Pacific War, migrant working

class, independence agitation,
arranged marriage

Recommendation

Summary

"Flowers at Dawn" opens with Anbarasan's arrival in Singapore from Tamil Nadu, sometime before the outbreak of the Second World War. His uncle has sent for him to join his daughter, Manimekalai, in an arranged marriage. Soon after arriving, his uncle organises for him to start working at Nee Soon Camp, where the British army trains its infantry and his uncle works as a gardener for the "durai" (chieftain). Anbarasan, who knows a little about bookkeeping, can start work immediately in the carpet store – much to the dismay of some of the other chieftains who rank lower than the white chieftain. Situations such as these remind Anbarasan of the slogans and teachings he picked up at political meetings in Chennai: "As long as the whites rule our motherland, our country cannot progress. Nor will inequality and poverty be uprooted." At his uncle's home, Anbarasan meets his soon-to-be bride, Manimekalai. She is shy at first, but the couple find subtle ways of showing affection. If only Nalliah weren't around. Nalliah is Manimekalai's childhood playmate and will do anything to make her his bride, including extortion and defaming Anbarasan as a Gandhi sympathiser. One night, Anbarasan suspects Nalliah of sneaking into their backyard, although he cannot quite fathom what Nalliah could have been up to. But before he can investigate further, a bomb is dropped, lighting up their entire neighbourhood. Due to the ensuing bombings and scarcity of food and other necessities, the couple decide to postpone their wedding. At a gathering of the Indian National Army (INA), where virtually the entire Tamil community comes together, they decide to join the army and fight for a free India. Their peers follow suit, including Nalliah, and the first brigades march into Burma soon afterwards. Will the young people survive and ever return to their parents?

Style and language

M. Balakrishnan, who published the novel under the pen name Singai Ma Elangkannan, sheds light on a little-known period in Singapore's history: when the British temporarily lost control of Singapore to the

Japanese (1942–1945). Rather than focusing on the historical or political aspects of this period, however, the book portrays it from the perspective of individuals, particularly Indian National Army (INA) soldiers and prisoners of war, who experienced a sudden surge of nationalism and were backed by the Japanese. Consequently, much of the historical and ideological context may be lost on readers unfamiliar with this chapter of Singapore's history. Nevertheless, the author successfully transports his readers to a Singapore long before the rise of a free market economy, when the ethnolinguistic makeup and glitz and glamour we associate with it today were merely a distant prospect. This rustic simplicity, possibly owing to the original Tamil text, is also quite tangible in the English translation by A. R. Venkatachalapathy.

Genre

Historical novel

Lenny Kaye Bugayong

This evaluation is based on the English translation by A. R. Venkatachalapathy.

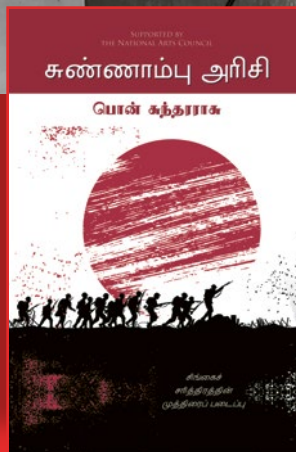
A. R. Venkatachalapathy is Professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai. He has taught at universities in Tirunelveli, Chennai, Chicago, and held the ICCR Chair of Indian Studies at the National University of Singapore, as well as fellowships in Paris, Cambridge, and Harvard. Published widely on the social, cultural and intellectual history of colonial Tamil Nadu, he translates between English and Tamil.

"Lime Rice"

by Pon Sundararaju



Pon Sundararaju came to Singapore from Tamil Nadu at the age of nine to pursue his studies. His literary works have been published in seven books. His short stories have been republished as four books. He has written 40 plays for television and 30 plays for radio. In 2021, he published his novel "Sunnaambu Arisi" (Lime Rice), which was short-listed for the Singapore Literature Prize 2022.



Crimson Earth

2021

Tamil (Sunnaambu Arisi)

304 pages

978-981-4967-440

World War II, Japanese occupation, minority perspective

Recommendation

Summary

The Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia during the Second World War has rarely been covered in European literature. While the fate of British prisoners of war is a well-known subject in English literature, that of the local population is not, particularly in non-English-speaking countries. Indian Tamil literature largely ignores the Second World War, since the country was comparatively unaffected. Even in Southeast Asian countries with Tamil minorities, such as Singapore, few novels and short stories address this period. "Lime Rice" fills the gap by telling the story of an isolated Indian Tamil community in northern Singapore under Japanese occupation. This translation will introduce a European readership to the history of a small, little-known minority that is nevertheless culturally and economically significant in today's Singapore.

The novel vividly and intensely describes the reactions of people accustomed to oppression and subjugation due to a change in overlords. They consider oppression to be their appointed fate, but what is striking here is their astonished dismay at the arbitrary and gratuitously cruel Japanese rule, in contrast to the British. The title Lime Rice refers to the rice distributed by the Japanese that was treated with lime to prevent it from rotting or becoming infested with vermin. The Tamils, for whom rice was the staple food, did not know how to prepare it and often became dangerously ill from consuming it.

In the face of Japanese cruelty, the community's leader – a teacher and a follower of Gandhi – advises them to submit and adapt rather than resist. The only instance of his opposition is his refusal to recruit Indians for the death railway. While a few Tamils joined the Indian National Army, the rest of the community tried to remain as invisible as possible and get by as best they could. There are a few instances of active and violent resistance against the Japanese: a young man who was wrongly accused of murdering a collaborating

Ceylonese Tamil, and a young woman who was avenging the kidnapping of her Chinese friend, who was forced to serve as a “comfort woman”. These instances end tragically, shortly before the Allied victory. Although the surrender of the Japanese was the precursor to the eventual independence of Malaya and Singapore, for the Tamils it was marred by individual tragedy and an uncertain future.

Style and language

The style is elaborate and ornamental, which is considered very beautiful in Tamil literature. The language is intense and can be extremely emotional. It vividly and realistically illustrates the community’s acute perception of extreme injustice and suffering, accompanied by despondency and helpless rage against the experienced atrocities.

The author mixes Malay, Chinese, English and Tamil words and idioms. This faithfully mirrors the everyday language of Singaporean and Malaysian Tamils. This style differs markedly from the “purer” Tamil spoken in India and Sri Lanka, providing immediacy and a unique literary quality.

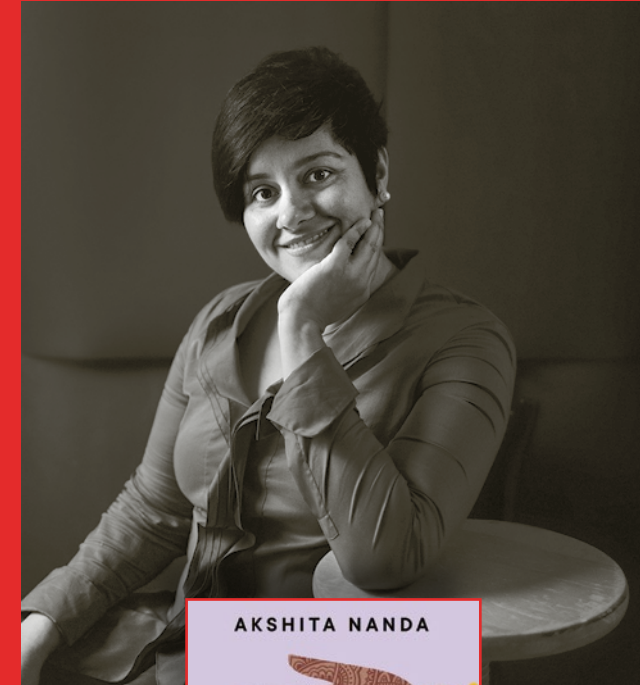
Genre

Novel, historical fiction

Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam

“Nimita’s Place” by Akshita Nanda

Akshita Nanda was born in Pune, India in 1979 and has lived in Singapore since 1995. She has a BSc degree (Hons) from the National University of Singapore and knows what to do with radio-active viruses. She has been in publishing since 2002 and joined The Straits Times in 2007, where she writes about health. Her debut novel “Nimita’s Place” co-won the SLP. In 2019, her novel “Beauty Queens of Bishan” was published by Penguin Random House SEA.



Epigram Books

2018

English

464 pages

978-981-47-8576-1

**multi-generational family story, female
scientist, food, search for identity**

Recommendation

Summary

India, 1940: Seventeen-year-old Nimita Khosla dreams of becoming an engineer, but is forced into an arranged marriage. Gradually, she begins to settle into her new role, even as the partition of India sparks unrest across the country. When violence draws closer, Nimita and her family are forced to abandon their sheltered life and seek a new home far away from everything they have known and loved.

Singapore, 2014: Nimita Sachdev, her granddaughter with the same first name, tries to escape the prospect of an arranged marriage by pursuing a career in molecular biology, far away from her family. Together with her two flatmates, she roams the food stalls of Singapore's bustling markets, only to be overcome again and again with longing for the home she left behind in India. What starts as a journey of liberation from cultural expectations becomes overshadowed by her uncertain visa status and growing questions of belonging.

Style and language

Though set in different times and places, the two storylines are united by the resilience and determination of both Nimitas to start over. Akshita Nanda opens with a deeply personal and authentic narrative from the first-person perspective of a Singaporean-Indian minority, shedding light on modern Singapore's rich cultural diversity. The third-person narration of Nimita Khosla's storyline, by contrast, allows for a more distanced engagement with the traumatic events of India's partition. Both characters are drawn with great intimacy and brought to life through their relationships and interactions with others. Language plays a vibrant and central role in Nanda's debut. Dialogues are peppered with Indian, Malay and Chinese expressions, rendered with striking precision for each speaker and their accent. Neologisms such as "bunbelievable" or "soup-erb"

reflect the author's playful command of language, while vivid and meticulous descriptions of food underscore its importance as a marker of cultural identity.

Genre

In her adopted home of Singapore, Nimita Sachdev is constantly caught between familiarity and foreignness: "I can smell properly ripe Alphonso mangoes, straight from Maharashtra State, where I was born." At the same time, she remains emotionally detached from moments like the national mourning following the death of Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew. By contrast, Nimita Khosla is forced by historical upheaval to leave her home, but keeps finding comfort in everyday life and the closeness of family. Both characters reveal how the search for a new place to call home can be a defining and transformative experience. Nanda's novel is both a portrait and a meditation on the deeply human longing for belonging, adaptability and the strength it takes to claim a space as one's own.

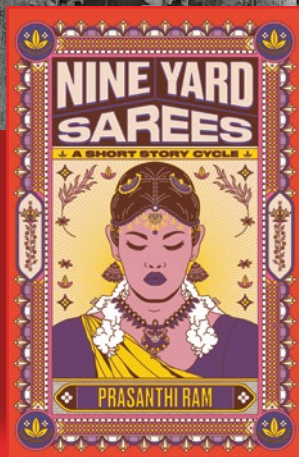
Lea Herlitz

"Nine Yard Sarees: A Short Story Cycle"

by Prasanthi Ram



Prasanthi Ram is a writer, editor and lecturer. In 2024, her debut short story cycle "Nine Yard Sarees" won the SLP and was also shortlisted for the Singapore Book Awards. Her writing has been published in the "Best Singaporean Short Stories: Volume Five" (2022) and "Making Kin: Ecofeminist Essays from Singapore" (2021). She is the co-founder and fiction editor of Mahogany Journal, which spotlights South Asian writers in Singapore.



Ethos Books

2023

English

272 pages

978-981-18-6035-5

multi-generational family story,
female solidarity, diasporic life,
tradition vs. modernity

Recommendation

Summary

This book tells the stories of nine women through the family history of an Iyer family in Singapore. Originally from Kalakad in India, the Srinivasans are Tamil Brahmins who have dispersed across various continents. Some of them now only keep in touch through phone messages. Padma and her sister Prema have each raised families of their own, but their relationships with their children are now strained as they are torn between tradition and modernity. Padma also holds a grudge against her own mother, Raji, unaware of her quest for what makes life worth living. As the wedding of Padma's daughter Keerthana approaches, the women face the daunting task of choosing a "madisar" for the bride: the eponymous nine-yard saree. Amid the ongoing wedding preparations, Raji finally decides to unearth a long-forgotten story from the past. As she hopes to find redemption, her revelation harbours the hidden seeds of doubt in her granddaughter's mind: should she go through with the wedding?

The eleven stories span multiple decades and feature intertwining family relations with a variety of diasporic life trajectories criss-crossing India, the US, China, Singapore, Korea and Australia. Written from the women's perspective, the stories openly challenge age-old dogmas that continue to affect female existence in Brahmin culture and beyond. "God created the female body with boundless malice, not consideration", laments Prema when speaking of stillbirth, describing the physical and emotional pain inflicted by both the event itself and its social repercussions. Ultimately, "Nine Yard Sarees" is both a love letter to the women in the author's life and an ode to sisterhood among women of all backgrounds.

Style and language

Prasanthi Ram wrote "Nine Yard Sarees" as part of her PhD dissertation, crediting her supervisor for introducing her to the short story cycle, her chosen mode of storytelling. The book is a series of self-contained short stories, some of which have previously been

published individually. Inspired by authors such as Alice Munro, Ram reportedly feels “more affinity to the parts than the sum”. This appears to be a reasonable approach to the circular nature of this intergenerational family epic, reflecting the complexities of the universal diaspora experience which inherently involves encountering the unfamiliar. However, despite the technical intricacy and the colloquialisms that readers may find obscure, the characters remain relatable. Using clear, elegant and lifelike language, Prasanthi Ram paints compelling yet tender portraits of the women she brings to life, never stealing the limelight from them.

Genre

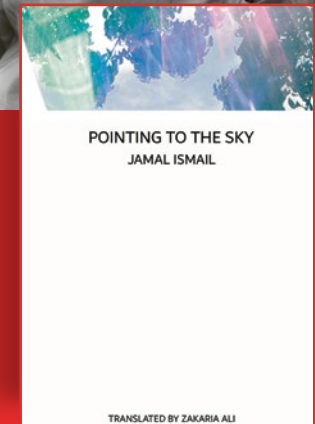
Short stories, short story cycle, novel, composite novel, novel-in-stories

Lenny Kaye Bugayong

“Pointing to the Sky”

by Jamal Ismail

Jamal Ismail is a regional player, actively involved in Malay literature and broadcasting. He is a recipient of several prestigious awards, including the SLP, and garnered multiple local, regional, and international awards. Notably, Pesta Perdana Singapura 2000, Anugerah Skrin TV3 Malaysia 2011 and 2013, the Loheh Noor Award from the Islamic Republic of Iran for his documentary on Islam in China in 1997, and the Anugerah Tun Seri Lanang 2023.



Self-published

2019

English translation by Zakaria Ali

Original in Malay “Tunjuk Langit”

(Unggun Creative)

188 pages

978-981-14-0722-2 (Malay edition)

senior citizens, housing crisis, social

Recommendation

Summary

The novel centres on a multiracial group of senior citizens living in a private care home named after the Tunjuk Langit tree, which literally means “pointing to the sky”. It depicts their everyday life, which oscillates between conversations about social issues and religion, and their rowdy adventures – for example, sneaking out at night to hold a wheelchair race. It also tells the stories of how each of them ended up there. Many of them did not choose this life for themselves, but were invited to live there by Jimmy, the founder and a fellow resident, after being abandoned by their families.

Following Jimmy’s sudden death, the home’s funding is cut, leaving the residents to confront the harsh reality of a society that doesn’t seem to care about its elders. The novel then takes a surprising turn: Habeb, a retired engineer, secretly builds a hot air balloon and takes to the sky, crashing the “Fifth Singapore Hot Air Balloon Fiesta”. He wants to raise awareness of the residents’ dire situation and of the general neglect of old people by modern society, which he believes builds welfare homes and rehabilitation centres only to get rid of them.

After spending several days in his balloon, which the police has anchored to the ground with a long rope, a freak weather phenomenon suddenly transforms Habeb and his vehicle into a large crystal arc. It becomes a monumental index finger pointing to the sky and sounding out prayer calls five times a day to remind society of the traditional values of former generations, such as taking care of your elders.

Style and language

Jamal Ismail’s narrative style is entertaining and humorous. He doesn’t concern himself with elaborate scenes or verbose descriptions. Instead, his short sentences, pointed dialogue and brief chapters – often no more than a page or two long – create a

fast-paced narrative which seems to contrast with the clumsiness and slowness often associated with old age. Thus, the boisterous, rowdy behaviour of the main characters not only rejects the potential claim that they might be unfit to keep up with a rapidly changing society, but even challenges it. While this often leads to unexpectedly funny scenes, the quick pace and sudden changes in scenery and characters can be hard to follow at times, so the reader’s full attention is demanded. This makes for a wonderfully engaging read.

Genre

Although the English translation’s subtitle characterises “Pointing to the Sky” as a speculative novel, it begins in a realistic manner, portraying the worldly struggles of its residents. It is only towards the end that the narrative suddenly becomes hyperbolic and fantastic, combining different narrative modes to convey social critique.

Raffael Weger

This evaluation is based on the English translation by Zakaria Ali.

Zakaria Ali is a writer and translator. His novel “Empangan” (The Dam) has been translated into English, German and Spanish. He received the S.E.A. Write Award in 2003. His literary output includes art criticism, essays on art history, and translations of works by writers such as Pablo Neruda, Raja Ahmad Aminullah, Kassim Ahmad, Jorge Luis Borges, Siti Zainon Ismail, and Anisah Barakbah.

"Shantih Shantih Shantih"

by Daryl Qilin Yam



Daryl Qilin Yam is a writer and arts organizer. His first novel, "Kappa Quartet" (2016), was longlisted for the Epigram Books Fiction Prize (EBFP); it was selected by The Business Times as one of the best novels of 2016. His second novel, "Lovelier, Lonelier", was a finalist for the 2021 EBFP and nominated for the 2023 International Dublin Literary Award. He co-founded the literary charity Sing Lit Station, where he serves as the managing editor.



Epigram Books

2025

English

100 pages

978-981-48-4530-4

dreamlike **atmosphere, exceptional**
weather phenomenon, loneliness,
insomnia

Recommendation

Summary

What would happen if it suddenly started to snow in Singapore in the middle of the night? Starting from this premise, the author embarks on a dreamlike narrative, taking the reader on an exploration of what keeps this equatorial city up at night. But what are the odds of that happening? And how long would it take before the snow turned to slush?

This short novella comprises twelve vignettes that transport the reader to various parts of the city and introduce them to its diverse demographics and the competing vernaculars that contribute to Singapore's uniqueness. We might start with the insomniac reporter who is woken by a call at four in the morning. The woman on the line is certain: it could snow any minute now. She suspects her husband of misusing company funds to finance his mistress's condominium on Mount Faber, and he has disappeared. He used to joke that he would only be caught cheating if it snowed in Singapore. The reporter laughs it off, but for the woman it is no laughing matter.

Alternatively, we could start with the taxi driver who knows the city like the back of his hand or the art student who runs into an old friend while searching for "antipodal points". Each vignette can be enjoyed in no particular order, like twelve equally delightful slices of cake. While the characters feed off one another in some way (they all witness the snowfall at the same time), each has their own secret that drives their subplot. This is a nod to Singapore's multi-layered society and how its members negotiate their shifting identities, aspirations and a longing to be seen or unseen within and beyond their global city.

Style and language

Daryl Qilin Yam's prose effortlessly spans the gap between the mundane and the supernatural. Showcasing Singapore's landmarks, it simultaneously exposes the crevices awaiting further scrutiny.

Throughout the novella, he sustains a tone that mirrors the dreamlike state of the characters, in those fleeting moments when the snow touches their skin and then disappears with little fanfare.

Genre

Novella, short stories

Lenny Kaye Bugayong

"The Campbell Gardens Ladies' Swimming Class"

by Vrushali Junnarkar

Vrushali Junnarkar is a dentist by training. When not practicing, teaching or researching in dentistry, she contributes opinion pieces to women's empowerment website Women's Web and writes for The Times of India on the various aspects of living abroad as an Indian. She has also been published in "What We Inherit: Growing Up Indian" (2022). "The Campbell Gardens Ladies' Swimming Class" is her first novel.



Epigram Books

2023

English

256 pages

978-981-51-0526-1

swimming, female empowerment,
friendship, feel good

Recommendation

Summary

In Campbell Gardens, a high-rise condominium complex in Singapore, we meet a diverse group of Indian expatriates. There is 35-year-old Suchi, a devoted housewife who frequently dreams of swimming and wishes she could be more daring, outspoken and carefree. Latha, a neurotic 38-year-old neurobiologist and passionate cook who calls her inept husband her “third son” and is secretly jealous of her Filipina housemaid’s extravagant outfits. There is also Gunjan, a cosmopolitan woman in her late forties who is embarrassed by her husband’s love of cooking. Having lived in many different countries, she now yearns for a sense of belonging. Finally, there is Radhika, a part-time accountant in her early thirties who has struggled with depression and miscarriages. She left behind a professional sports career in India due to experiences of harassment. While their husbands are at work and their children at school, the women clean and cook. They also meet up at the poolside in the condo’s courtyard, where they gossip about other residents and discuss the cultural differences they observe in this international microcosm. The pool itself and the people swimming there are frequent talking points for the women, most of whom have never learnt to swim and have grown up with strict social norms about showing one’s body in public. When the women eventually decide to take swimming lessons, they begin to question their conservative belief systems and feelings of shame about body image. They gradually overcome their insecurities and discover a newfound self-confidence. Suchi, who realises in the water that she can “simply let herself and her body exist”, finally stops dreaming about swimming. Meanwhile, Radhika’s newly acquired swimming skills come to fruition in an unexpected way when she rescues an unsupervised child who has fallen into the pool. Lastly, Gunjan persuades her husband and daughter to swim with her, strengthening their family bond. In the end, Suchi’s husband even starts to rethink some of his deeply held patriarchal beliefs.

Style and language

Junnarkar’s omniscient narrator effortlessly guides us through the daily highs and lows experienced by the protagonists of her novel. She provides insights into cultural differences within and outside the group, while subjects such as shame, body image and gender roles will resonate with a general audience. Through the eyes of this small community of Indian expatriates, we also catch curious glimpses into life in Singapore, such as the religious coexistence of Christmas reindeer decorations, Diwali lamp cut-outs and Chinese New Year banners. Thanks to Junnarkar’s playful and ironic style, as well as her cast of likeable characters, the novel becomes a touching story about community, belonging and liberation through swimming.

Genre

Vrushali Junnarkar’s contemporary fiction novel, “The Campbell Gardens Ladies’ Swimming Class”, is written in accessible language, offering readers an insight into the lives of an Indian migrant community in Singapore.

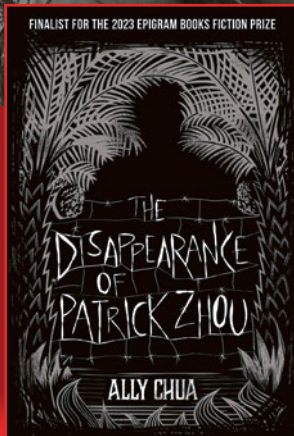
Michael Candeias Schneider

"The Disappearance of Patrick Zhou"

by Ally Chua



Ally Chua was the 2019 Singapore Unbound Fellow for New York City, and a member of writing collective /s@ber. She has been published in QLRs, Cordite Poetry Review, Lammergeier Magazine and Thimble Magazine. Her poetry collection, "Acts of Self Consumption", was published by Recent Work Press in Spring 2023. "The Disappearance of Patrick Zhou" is her first novel and was a finalist for the 2023 Epigram Books Fiction Prize.



Epigram Books

2023

English

256 pages

978-981-51-0530-8

palm oil industry, family dynasty,
Neo-Gothic, detective fiction

Recommendation

Summary

Young journalist Layla Zhou is the daughter of a powerful Malaysian industrialist in the lucrative, but highly controversial palm oil business. Their family legacy is the vast and influential Zhou-Guthrie Group. At the start of the novel, Layla, who grew up mostly in Singapore with her late mother's sister, returns to Malaysia to say goodbye to her terminally ill grandmother. On her deathbed, the old woman asks Layla to uncover what really happened to Layla's uncle Patrick, who vanished under mysterious circumstances 20 years earlier on his way to a business conference. A charismatic heir to the family empire, Patrick is believed to have fallen victim to a violent crime, but the case was never solved.

As Layla begins to investigate, she soon finds herself in danger. Her search leads her deep into a web of company and family secrets, ranging from environmental scandals and corporate misconduct to capital crimes including rape and murder. It gradually becomes clear just how dysfunctional the Zhou family truly is – and how the company has slipped into crisis under the rigid leadership of its aging patriarch, Layla's grandfather, who refuses to modernise. Layla's research becomes an emotional ordeal as she is forced to confront ghosts from her own past. Eventually, she uncovers the devastating truth: her uncle Patrick had abused her as a child, and was killed by her father Philip in an act of vengeance. Struggling to come to terms with what she has learned, Layla retreats from her Malaysian family and returns to Singapore. In the final chapter, however, we learn that she returns years later – personally transformed – to take on a leading role in the company and help steer Zhou-Guthrie into a new future.

Style and language

Told in three parts and 46 chapters, the novel is narrated in the first person from Layla's perspective. From about halfway through, her account is interspersed with diary entries by her father, written

under the heading “Things you don’t tell your child”. These passages, set apart by both colour and typography, gradually reveal Patrick’s murder from the perpetrator’s point of view. Chua’s fluid, dialogue-rich storytelling, her understated yet elegant style, and her sharply honed prose, result in a gripping literary thriller that’s full of unexpected twists and impossible to put down. Chua also portrays the novel’s diverse cast of characters – from ultra-wealthy elites to rural farmers and migrant workers – with a highly differentiated sense of voice and register.

Genre

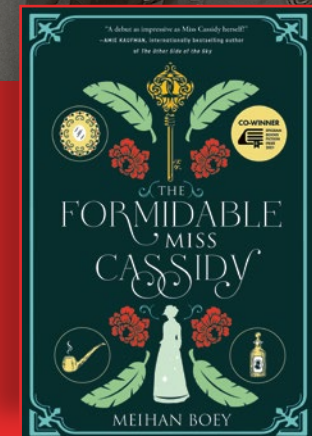
“The Disappearance of Patrick Zhou” is a true page-turner. The slow unravelling of the family’s past and the growing tension between power and morality is riveting, as is Layla’s journey of self-discovery and reflection. Along the way, the novel paints a vivid and often eye-opening picture of Southeast Asia, a region of stark contrasts and economic extremes, which will be especially fascinating for European readers.

Ilona Zuber

“The Formidable Miss Cassidy”

by Meihan Boey

Meihan Boey is the author of “The Formidable Miss Cassidy” (co-winner of the 2021 Epigram Books Fiction Prize and winner of the 2022 Singapore Book Awards), its sequel “The Enigmatic Madam Ingram” (shortlisted for the 2023 EBFP), as well as the sci-fi novella “The Messiah Virus” (2019). “The Formidable Miss Cassidy” was recently published in the UK, the US, and Italy. She is Vice President of the Association of Comic Artists of Singapore.



Epigram Books

2021

English

288 pages

978-981-49-0188-8

nanny, Victorian tropes, supernatural,
mystical creatures

Recommendation

Summary

Meihan Boey's novel "The Formidable Miss Cassidy" introduces an extraordinary protagonist: an older, flame-haired Irishwoman who arrives in colonial Singapore as a paid companion. At first, she seems nothing more than an adventurous, experienced and humorous woman, teaching her charges English, manners and practical skills. Yet, it soon becomes clear that she is far more than she appears.

Unsettling events unfold in her first household with a British gentleman of the East India Company and his daughter. A mysterious curse drains the master's strength, and what begins as a gothic mystery soon reveals Miss Cassidy's true nature. Unfazed by eerie forces, she seeks not only to shield those in her care but also to dispel the darkness itself. Later, in her second placement with a Chinese family, she again encounters a curse, further proving her extraordinary nature. Gradually, the reader realises that Miss Cassidy is not merely familiar with the supernatural – she is bound to it, a creature of extraordinary origin.

What makes her stand out is her contrast to the gloomy world around her: bubbly, witty and full of charm, she refuses to despair and instead brings warmth, playful humour and steady authority wherever she goes. Boey immerses her audience in the sweltering, humid atmosphere of 19th-century Singapore, where colonial life unfolds against a backdrop of blurred boundaries between the living, the dead and the otherworldly. At the heart of it all is Miss Cassidy: flame-haired, sharp-witted and carrying her role with humour and ease.

Style and language

Although Boey writes in deceptively simple prose, her descriptions are vivid, colourful and precise. She pays close attention to the smallest details, such as clothing, gestures and the quirks of

a character's manner. Her characters grow and change with age, in relationships and through the curses that shape and release them. They fall in love, grow older, learn new languages, cook, marry and raise children. Abundant dialogue flows alongside fantastical beings that slip from the shadows with increasing frequency as the story progresses.

Above all, the tone remains light and entertaining. Miss Cassidy's wit and high spirits provide a bright counterbalance to the darker elements of this gothic mystery, creating an eerie yet delightful reading experience grounded in everyday emotions with which many readers can relate.

Genre

"The Formidable Miss Cassidy" defies genre classification. Part historical fiction, it evokes the sweltering atmosphere of late-colonial Singapore, and part fantasy, it features curses, folklore and supernatural beings. It is also a coming-of-age tale, as secondary characters grow into themselves within a shifting society.

The book intertwines themes of colonial society, intercultural diversity and identity within a layered social hierarchy. While fantastical creatures emerge from the shadows, it is the human cast – bound by family, love and resilience – that captivates the reader throughout the novel.

Mayya Chernobylskaya

"The Statue at the Museum"

by Farihan Bahron



Farihan Bahron is a Singaporean writer and publisher whose works have received accolades, including the Golden Point Award (2003, 2015), the SLP (2018, 2022, 2024), and Anugerah Persuratan (2021, 2023). He was honoured with the Promising Award in 2017 and the MASTERA Young Laureate Appreciation in 2023. Farihan holds a diploma in Visual Communication, a BA in Malay Language and Literature, and is currently pursuing a master's degree in Malay Studies.



Unggun Creative

2023

Malay (Arca di Muzium)

194 pages

978-981-18-7656-1

**society, mystery, escape room,
young adult**

Recommendation

Summary

What would the world be like without crime, murder, rape, robbery or illicit drug dealing? Welcome to Singapore in the year 2043: a country where prisons have been abolished. Crimes of the past can now only be seen in the Muzium Jenayah (Museum of Crime).

In September 2043, Adam, the novel's protagonist, begins his first day of work at the Muzium Jenayah. He is tasked with guiding a group of twelve visitors through the exhibition, but one of the participants suddenly disappears. Shortly afterwards, he reappears in one of the display cases as a small statue (arca) among other miniature figures.

But how did it happen? The museum is immediately locked down. No one is allowed in or out. An 18-year-old visitor tries to escape and breaks a window. He is immediately put to death by Panopticon, a surveillance system that kills via electric shock. Everyone else can only watch.

The exhibition transforms into a labyrinth of locks – doors only open when the visitors and their guide Adam can answer questions posed by Panopticon. They are very personal questions about their identity, biography, moral attitudes and sense of social responsibility. One visitor after another eventually confesses to secret offences.

This futuristic world combines mysterious transformations and philosophical questions with elements of a crime thriller, leaving the reader unsettled, yet also full of curiosity and excitement for the next chapter.

Style and language

The novel is written in Bahasa Melayu (Malay) and is aimed at readers aged 15 to 35. The modern, youthful language with clear expressions and short, well-structured sentences is intended to appeal primarily to younger audiences.

Genre

The novel "Arca di Muzium" can be classified as science fiction, but also features elements of mystery and crime fiction. It can also be seen as a modern Bildungsroman.

The author aims to encourage young readers to think about their own moral values and social responsibility. References are made to modern technologies, such as drones and deepfake fraud, as well as modern games, such as escape rooms. It also draws on local history and culture, including the story of the cursed son "Tanggung" from the Malay Annals. Educational elements are also woven into the story without coming across as didactic, such as Kantian theory.

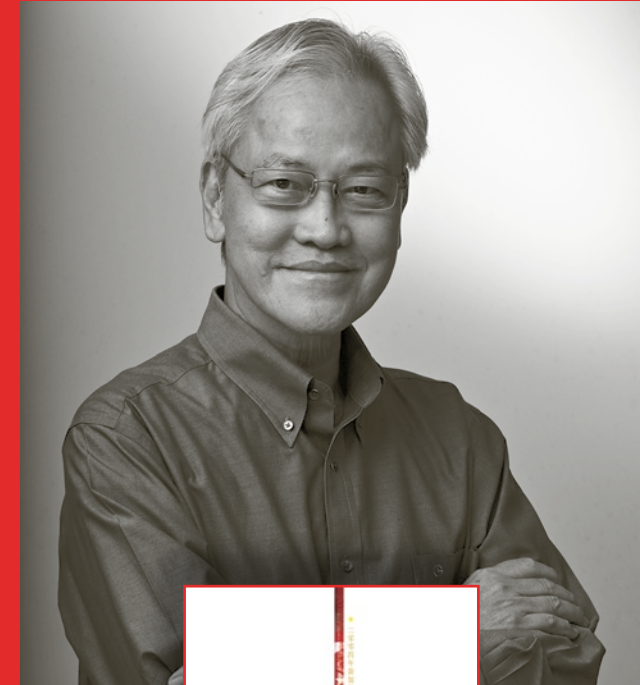
The fictional surveillance system Panopticon chillingly demonstrates the impact that omnipresent, AI-controlled surveillance can have on society.

Hedy Holzwarth

"Unrest"

by Yeng Pway Ngon

Yeng Pway Ngon (1947–2021) was a recipient of the 2003 Cultural Medallion for Literature. He has published 30 volumes of poetry, fiction, essays, plays and literary criticism in Chinese. In 2013, he received the S.E.A. Write Award. Yeng Pway Ngon won the National Book Development Council's Book Award 1987–88 as well as the SLP in 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2016. His poetry and novels have been translated into English and Italian.



City Book Room

2003, Reprint 2018

Chinese

English translation by Jeremy Tiang

available (Balestier Press)

236 pages

978-981-11-6297-8

political activism, migration,

Recommendation

Summary

In "Unrest" ("Saodong", Chinese original 2002; English translation 2012), Yeng Pway Ngon (1947–2021) paints a sweeping portrait of personal and societal conflict. Through the lives of four central characters, the novel traces the political and social upheavals that shaped East and Southeast Asia from the 1960s to the 1990s. Growing up in southern Malaysia, the protagonists join a radical student group and become involved in the Communist Party of Malaysia's struggle against British rule. After the movement is suppressed, their paths diverge: Daming and Ziqin, who become a couple, abandon their plan to emigrate to China for a life in Hong Kong instead, where they marry and Daming becomes a successful businessman. Guoliang stays in Singapore, fighting to survive, while Weikang emigrates to China, only to become a target of persecution during the Cultural Revolution as a result of his foreign background. The story follows these characters through a landscape shaped by politics, migration, love, ideals and betrayal, spanning locations from Singapore, Hong Kong and China to Canada. The narrative ranges from intimate relationship crises to historic upheavals such as the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the Tiananmen Square massacre (1989).

Style and language

Yeng's style is marked by a cool, restrained voice that captures the emotional depth and complexity of his characters. The narrative shifts between first-person perspectives, dialogue and reflections from a narrator who appears in the novel as its own author – engaging in metafictional dialogue with his characters, especially Ziqin, who resists conforming to the male author's expectations. This postmodern self-reflection openly references writers such as Barthes and Robbe-Grillet. Despite these formal experiments, the language remains precise, poetic and ironic, rich in intertextual references.

The novel's dense structure never loses its emotional resonance: loneliness, political idealism, disillusionment and longing are constant themes.

Genre

"Unrest" defies strict genre categorisation. As a historical social novel, it explores Singaporean-Chinese mentalities across decades. As a postmodern meta-novel, it questions the authority of the author. And as a work of exile literature, it offers insight into the migrant experience in Hong Kong, China and Canada. While deeply rooted in the specific history of Singapore and the Chinese diaspora, the novel is also a radical meditation on failure and the dignity of writing, loving and remembering – and on the never-ending struggle to live a self-determined life amid the tensions between East and West, past and present.

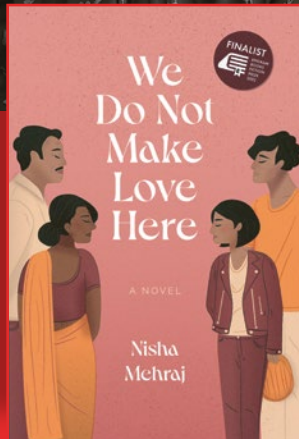
Thomas Zimmer

"We Do Not Make Love Here"

by Nisha Mehraj



Nisha Mehraj left full-time teaching and became a private tutor so she could pursue writing. The many strong women she has met and read about, and her own grandmother's determination to raise her daughters as independent thinking women, taught her to have ambitions. Her short story "Chai" was published in Mascara Literary Review (2012). "We Do Not Make Love Here", a finalist for the 2022 EBFP, is her first novel.



Epigram Books

2022

English

248 pages

978-981-49-8469-0

multi-generational relationships,
arranged marriage,
multiple perspectives, reflecting life

Recommendation

Summary

In "We Do Not Make Love Here", Nisha Mehraj tells the story of four intertwined lives in Singapore. Chandru and Meera are in an arranged marriage and treat it much like the construction company they founded together: as a business. While Chandru feels lonely and unloved, Meera is consumed by anger and disappointment. She lives more for the men in her life – her father, her husband and her son – than for herself. This eventually leads her to start an affair. Their son, Siddharth, is trying to find his way in life, but he is more interested in sports and girls than his parents' business. The most important of these girls is Malli, who lives in an all-female household next door as an adopted child. She and Siddharth grow up together, spending much of their youth side by side, almost like family. Malli's grandmother educates Siddharth, while Malli finds a father figure in Chandru, Siddharth's father. Ultimately, she takes over the company. What begins as a sibling-like relationship turns into unrequited love for both of them.

We accompany these four protagonists from two different generations in Singapore as they try to live their own Singaporean dream, and like most, they ultimately must come to terms with a very different reality. We get to know their feelings, their desires and their search for what is negated in the book's title: love.

Although topics such as racism and violence, as well as life in a melting pot of Indian, Malaysian and Chinese populations, are touched upon in the subtext, "We Do Not Make Love Here" is essentially about the lives we do not live, and how we find peace with the ones we do. Although it may sound desperate at first, the novel is so authentic and relatable that, as readers, we finish the book with a slightly nostalgic feeling of acceptance, much like the protagonists.

Contributors

Style and language

Rather than telling the story in strict chronological order, the author provides insights into different periods in the protagonists' lives. Mehraj does a remarkable job of introducing her four main characters and depicting their different paths by dedicating a separate chapter to each of them, written from their unique perspectives. Writing from four different points of view is certainly not easy, yet each chapter has its own tone and pace, always remaining true to the character whose perspective it adopts. Consequently, after the first few chapters, we gain an understanding of every encounter between the protagonists from all sides, making the book an unusual and interesting read.

Genre

Although it is a fictional drama, "We Do Not Make Love Here" feels very realistic and biographical. It oscillates between a coming-of-age tale, comedic elements that balance out the dark tone and character-driven narration, leaving us eagerly awaiting the next chapter about the protagonist we have just accompanied.

Laura Willuhn Novoa

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