

New Stories for a Staid People:
An Interview with Suchen Christine Lim
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Suchen Christine Lim is a prominent Singaporean writer, the author of four novels and a history of the Chinese diaspora. Her third novel, *Fistful of Colours* (1993), was the inaugural winner of the Singapore Literature Prize in 1992. And she recently found herself on the shortlist again for her latest work, the short story collection *The Lies That Build a Marriage* (2007). This interview took place in Singapore on 15 June 2008.

Your latest work of fiction, The Lies That Build a Marriage, marks a departure from your four earlier works in that it's a collection of short stories, not a novel. Yet, as you suggest in the postscript to the collection, short stories seem increasingly out of favour with publishers.

Well, I think publishers expect short stories to be published in journals or magazines or specific publications for short fiction. And short fiction seems to be more appropriate for the internet. So I think a lot of publishers like the ones here in Singapore didn't want to publish collections of short stories any more. They believe that novels will sell better. It has to do with their perception of sales. In Singapore in the 1970s, Catherine Lim's *Little Ironies* and all the other short stories did well. Then suddenly there were novels in the 1980s. And I was one of those who wrote novels in that decade.

So why the shift to this other genre, given your perception of the Singaporean—if not international—publishing bias in favour of novels and against the short story?

Ah. See that's personal. I stumbled into writing with a children's story. Then my first work of fiction for adults was *Rice Bowl*, and it was a novel. I wrote four novels. And I thought I could never write a short

story in the same way as I still think that I can never write a poem. So when I was asked to write my first short story—I can't remember which one it was—I just wrote that. And, at the time I was writing the short stories, a number of which were published elsewhere, I was working in the Ministry of Education and doing syllabus design, planning a new syllabus, chairing two committees on syllabus development and writing papers for the Ministry of Education on the state of grammar in Singapore. All of these things were driving me nuts! So I didn't think I could manage a novel. To save my soul and my imagination and my sanity, I agreed to write short stories.

But this wasn't the first time that you wrote short stories. You won a prize as a short story writer when you were younger.

Ah. I didn't think of that as a short story. That was like a children's story. It was for children.

And you got second prize for another short story.

That was also a children's story. I don't even remember the title. That was a very painful period you know. So I sort of erased that part. I didn't remember it. That's water under the bridge and I don't want to remember it. I can't remember the title. I remember "The Valley of the Golden Showers." That is the first children's story, the one about mice. But the second one that supposedly won second prize, I can't remember.

You mention this in interview with Mohammed A. Quayum. You received second prize but there was no joy...nobody was particularly happy about it, including you.

Well, that was because my "significant other" was not happy about it....

Not happy that you were succeeding as a writer? Because he entered the competition as well.

He did. He did. He thought he would win. And he didn't. I won a prize. That created a lot of tension for a while. It wasn't a good feeling at all. I think all these things added to my insecurity about whether I could write or not.

Now you seem much more secure as a writer, obviously. Taking on this new genre—or revisiting it, perhaps—despite a contemporary disregard for it, testifies to that sense of security.

Yes. You know, I thought to myself that after four novels, if I don't feel secure and don't feel that I have received a gift then I am utterly ungrateful to whoever gave me this gift. Whether it was parental, DNA, God, or whatever, you know. I am grateful.

In an interview you conducted with Quayam, you mentioned that you wrote your second novel, Gift for the Gods, though the idea for Fistful of Colours came to you first. And it was because you weren't ready to contend with that strong character, Suwen, at the time. I wonder, given the difficulty of the subject matter in many of these stories, whether there was a similar process at work here? What brought you to write these particular stories that deal with very difficult issues for Singapore at this particular time in your life as a writer?

I didn't feel they were difficult to write. In fact, I enjoyed writing many of these stories. Some of them, as I mentioned earlier, were written while I was chairing the curriculum development committee that was driving me nuts. So it was a pleasure to be asked to write a short story. And I think in 2003, when I was in Perth, at the University of Western Australia, I wrote "Ah Nah," and discovered that I could be quite mischievous and look at the things that have been suppressed in Singapore's education system. In fact I'm still thinking about such things. I have one story forthcoming in the UK about the same issues, dealing with discipline in schools. From a distance you can see the mountain clearly. So I think that's why I need to go abroad. For the other stories, I just tapped into my memories and my childhood in Malaysia and my teenage years here. And the kinds of things I observed or eavesdropped from conversations. They came to me quite well. Like the first story "The Morning After." This Reverend Yap just gave me two rules to follow: 1. About twenty minutes. Don't be long. You will lose the congregation. 2. For his congregation for Christmas. And that was it. And I thought about it for about two months, and then I sat down one day to write it,

and I finished the draft in about three days. And sent it to him. Then it was just a matter of redrafting.

You've mentioned your work in curriculum development for the Singapore Ministry of Education. I am interested in how that work influenced your earlier writing. And I'm particularly interested in how your departure from that position enabled you to write the stories in Lies. You just said "From a distance you can see the mountain clearly."

Yes. I think I had to work in the Ministry of Education writing language materials because, as a single mother, I appreciated a well paying job. It was stable and secure. And, I knew that I could do my job well. In fact I had a medal for it. Oh, yes. I have an efficiency medal for it. In that position, somehow or other, I had to think about writing in terms of the language policies of Singapore and things like that. But it didn't free my mind enough. It didn't restrict me from dealing with the historical past, and so on, as in the novels, you know. You could be playing around with the past and that was fine. But this collection is a bit closer to home. You see, my son is gay. We've talked about it publicly. I have written about it with him. And I knew that this audience who was going to listen to "The Morning After" contained people who were gay. So I wanted to write something that could speak to them from a parent's point of view. I realized that a lot of the stories written on homosexuality have to do with young people coming out, discovering themselves, but I hadn't come across anything to do with a parent coming to terms with that, you know, and the feelings from an Asian angle. So I thought, why not? And I felt that I was ready to do it. It was just a sense of readiness inside.

And do you think you were ready in part because you had left that position and you felt liberated by leaving the Ministry of Education?

I'm not sure.

I guess I'm wondering whether you would have written this story had you stayed?

I think I would have. I would have. And just stayed there and said well, "See what you can do." The same way I reacted when my previous direc-

tor wanted to censor *Gift from the Gods*. I mean I'm not the kind who will shout and all that. I'll just do it. And I'll wait for your response, you know. And I think that's mature and elegant. Shouting and carrying a placard is not.

But you have taken strong stances on political and cultural issues in your fiction all along, so this was not inconsistent as far as you're concerned.

No. No. Not at all. I started off with something that I was passionate about, which was history. All my teachers told me that "History is for the dustbin and it won't bring you a good job. You'll only end up in teaching." That was coming from my teachers and other pupils. So I wanted to show them that we actually have a wonderful, a colourful, and also a suppressed history that is not celebrated. I remember I once attended a conference, where a brother from the De La Salle Christian Brothers' school stood up—a young man—and said that the reason Singapore had no fiction was because it had no history. And I don't know what made me just stand up to tell him that there will be one, one day. That was in the early 1980s. In the 1970s and 1980s people had very narrow views of this island. Maybe because I came from Malaysia with a sense of space and mountains and blue sky, I saw this island differently. And I felt that the very earth of this island could speak to me when I walked. That may sound weird, I know. But I think they just weren't listening. Singaporeans drive around all the time in cars. And when you are on wheels you can't listen. But I walk. I walked a lot even as a teenager.

That comment brings to mind my reaction to much of your fiction. I sense when I read this collection along with your earlier works some ambivalence about Singapore. It is animated by a seemingly contradictory desire to celebrate and criticize. That is not really a contradiction, of course.

No, no, it is not a contradiction. It is the right of every family member to do so. We love our family, and we are also critical. We love our parents, and we are also highly critical. They are the ones we fought with the most, other than our wives and husbands.

To what extent do you see yourself as a writer who interrogates Singaporean culture and history?

Yes, I see myself in that way. Yes, “interrogate” is the word because my work questions a lot of state propaganda and soft sell and public relations and all of that. As I’ve said before, in Singapore we are getting more wealthy. We are living almost like birds in a gilded cage, and the cage is being made more and more comfortable, so that we eventually forget that we have these bars. I call them bars. Other people call them boundaries. You can choose to ignore them or you can choose to slip between the bars. That’s why I see myself as water. I have the strength of water. And water can go anywhere without having to be a battering ram.

Let’s shift then to the direction you go in The Lies That Build a Marriage. As the title suggests, many of the stories are about failed marital relationships. Fathers seem to consistently abandon their families. Mothers are left with the responsibilities of raising their children and soon become domineering and stifling to their children. And even when relationships last, they seem to be predicated upon lies. Would you say this is a fair reading of the marital relationships in the collection?

It sounds kind of bleak. It sounds bleak. But it’s not that bleak. I think perhaps I am a hard realist in looking at relationships that...I do not know. It’s not perfect. And yet, imperfection has its own grace. Here maybe I am influenced by the Japanese sense of beauty, that you strive towards perfection but you never reach it. And I see relationships like a constant striving, dancing. You come and go, you come and go, and that’s it.

That sounds much more harmonious than some of the relationships that we see.

No, that’s because you perceive dance as a Westerner, you know. A kind of a Viennese Waltz. No it is not. The Chinese dance can be martial. It can be like a fight, or shadowboxing, or Tai Chi, or Wushu. And that’s like a dance. It is not like the way Westerners perceive dance. Formal occasion. Coming out. Those kinds of thing.

Yes. I guess what I’m identifying is the dysfunction of this dance. There’s a lot of dysfunction in the relationships you represent, and I’m wondering where that comes from?

Probably from my family, from my growing up years, from my own marriage, from the relationships I see around me of friends, acquaintances, colleagues. Writers are like magpies. We collect trivia. And sometimes you look at these things that you've collected, and they make a mosaic. You take bits and pieces of broken things and you make them into a whole as a story. And that, I think, is the role of the imagination.

I've brought this issue up with you in other conversations. Basically, I think in some way the representation of women in this dance—the wives and mothers abandoned or cheated upon, along with those aspiring to be wives—are quite critical. There's obviously sympathy for them and their plight as well, but there is, I suggest, a strong sense that they exploit their roles as victims of men.

Ah. I like that phrase. "They exploit their roles as victims of men." They play the role of victims very well. But it is also a kind of control eventually. And I see that in our culture. I've seen my grandmother, my great aunts, all these people.... They're supposed to be submissive wives. No power. They did not control the purse strings, for example, except for whatever money was doled out by the men. And they were victims. But they played their role very well. And so you can wear the victim's cloak and be strong inside. And I think in Chinese culture and a lot of cultures of Asia you have that. No woman is totally without strength. Everyone is strong in some way.

I see that in your characterizations. The women are incredibly strong in many ways. I wonder if what informs the way women behave in your stories is their desire not only for love and acknowledgement but also their desire for legitimacy. And if so, ultimately, I want to know if we can see in that desire for legitimacy a desire particular to women in Singapore?

What do you mean by legitimacy?

Well, let's look at the case of Pak Mei in "The Lies That Build a Marriage." She wants to be a wife. She wants to have children. That seems consistent with what other women want in these stories. Wives want to have a central role in the family. They want recognition first through marriage, then by

conceiving sons. So what they really want is some sort of cultural acknowledgement that they have fulfilled their roles as women in society. And in some ways this desire, which I'm calling a desire for legitimacy, is incredibly disabling to them. Is this a fair assessment?

I think you have read it quite accurately, this tension in women who were born into the margins, like Pak Mei. And so part of her desire would be to be in the mainstream, acknowledged in the mainstream as the wife of somebody, as the mother of somebody. There are a lot of public rituals of acknowledgement, you know, like the ten-course- dinner wedding banquet. But when one is denied that...? Then the strong woman tries to seek other means of getting there. And that's why, in the end, Pak Mei paid for her own trousseau, the white wedding gown and all that. And that's the modern part of her. You know, this tension between the old and new. She's not modern enough to say "Heck with it! I don't need this." And at the same time she is modern enough to determine that if she cannot get it through traditional means, through her mother-in-law, for example, she can do it herself. But she's still trapped within that system. And I see a lot of Singapore women, really Asian women, doing that. You know, the mistress will not be happy being a mistress. To me, if you are totally modern, and you don't believe in mainstream values, then you're quite happy to be a mistress. But most women are not. No matter how loved they are, they want then to occupy the central position.

Do you think this desire has anything to do with the status of women in Singaporean culture?

I'm not sure about today's Singapore. Women in their twenties today, they probably reach a position when they say, "Well, if I want to be a mistress or I want to be a lover, well ... that's it. Finish." People like Pak Mei were women who grew up in the 1950s, you know, and developed into adulthood in the 1970s when we had a more conservative kind of Singapore. Actually, that story, in my mind, took place in the 1970s when Singapore was still newly independent and was still coming to grips with opening up as a society.

Let's shift to another kind of opening for a bit, the one described by the postscript to Lies, and one that will bring us back to your representations of contemporary Singapore. You were commissioned to write three of these stories—"The Morning After," "My Two Mothers," and "Usha and My Third Child"—in place of sermons for church services. Was there anything different about writing these stories because you were commissioned to do so? Do you see these stories as different from the others because of the fact that you came to write them for specific occasions?

Ah, yes. Because I think these three stories were written to be read out to a live audience. So I think it probably affected the style of the writing and the length. I had to compress or select certain incidents and just leave it at that. I could have gone into some lyrical descriptions of some things, but I didn't. I had to keep the attention of an audience in a church. And I didn't want to end up at the same time sounding like a preacher. I am a fiction writer and I'm very clear about that. I'm not doing sermons. But I am probably tapping into the Chinatown storyteller, the people who told stories and stopped at certain dramatic moments. So I thought well, this is one segment. Twenty minutes. Finish. That's what I think makes them different.

Three of the stories may have been written for church congregations, but they were written in place of sermons, weren't they?

Not in place of the sermon. That was wish of the organizers. They wanted me to read out a story for the occasions, you know. Like Christmas, like International Women's Day, like Mother's Day. As stories. They were quite clear about that. I was not doing a sermon.

Nonetheless do you see your role as a writer who interrogates Singaporean culture and history, not as a sermonizer, but as someone who creates stories that can be used as sermons?

No. That never occurred to me. I see myself as witness, a chronicler, and witness who looks to the left when the government says look right. One who looks back and forward and everywhere else as far as possible, turning my head 360 degrees around. Yes. Yes. So it's more witnessing. And then being able to chronicle what I see and hear.

In asking that question I was thinking back to an essay by Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," wondering if you saw yourself in a similar light.

Yes, he was a school inspector. Ah no. Teaching did not figure with me so strongly.

Even though you were a teacher at one point...

Yes, but I was having fun, you know. It was more like "Let's learn together and let's develop our own crap detector." That was my role as a teacher, even with my sons.

These three commissioned stories, along with "The Man Who Wore his Wife's Sarong," might be read as particularly contentious, given the cultural conservatism of Singapore. One deals with homosexuality, one with lesbianism, one with having a child out of wedlock, one with cross-dressing....

[Laughter]

So what brought you to take on these particular issues?

Because I have not seen them raised in Singaporean fiction and I thought they would make good subjects. I mean, as I said, when everybody is turning to look right, it's quite interesting to look left and see what else is available. And the other thing I thought, you know, is that since I had already looked at the underside of Singapore history, I should look at the underside of contemporary society, the side that we don't want to talk about too much. We still have this law 377A, you know, and homosexual sex is prosecuted. You could be jailed. It's a criminal act. And I feel sexuality is a matter for consenting adults. I don't want the government in the bedroom.

And this is obviously a matter that is close to your heart as well.

Oh it's close to my heart whether I have a gay son or not. I would still feel the same thing. I don't want somebody else from the government creeping in, you know. Whether I want to make a third baby or not. That's my right. I don't want to produce a baby because it is the responsibility of a citizen to reproduce either.

So how would you characterize the reaction of readers and audiences to these particular stories?

I told you in another conversation that the men were very receptive and gave highly positive responses, both homosexual and heterosexual men, and from all age groups. And that took me by surprise. Normally very few male readers would come up to me and say “Good.” In fact, I launched this book in Ateneo de Manila University, which is a Jesuit university. I did a reading of “The Morning After.” Then the day after that, I was walking across a pedestrian bridge with a friend and this man saw me from the other side. He just waved and he shouted from across the road: “Suchen that was great! I finished the book in one night.” So that was the kind of reaction. And then here I had someone who was sixty-eight years old, a friend I hadn’t heard from in many years. And he rang me up and gave me an almost biblical analysis of “Retired Rebel.” He’s retired. And obviously it speaks to him. And I had the director of a multinational company in his fifties who said he read the collection twice and he told me how he was moved by “Christmas Memories of a Chinese Stepfather.”

That suggests that there is a real hunger for these kinds of stories.

That’s what I found. Interestingly, among the men! I haven’t had such reactions from women. The women’s responses were quieter, you know. They just told me they wept. This or that story made them cry. I read “My Two Mothers” recently to an audience of teenagers, fourteen to seventeen, in the creative arts seminar in the National University of Singapore. And several of them came up to me and said “I was so moved.” And another young woman came up to me and said, “I’m a Christian. I’m very disturbed. What shall I do?” So it kind of set them thinking, you know.

Now maybe you could tell me about the process of getting this collection published. You talk about it somewhat in the postscript.

I had been encouraged to put my short stories together by a number of people. I went through a period of writer’s block after writing the stories. So I thought, “Well, okay, since I can’t do new work, I might as

well work on a collection.” Then I started a new story, “The Man Who Wore his Wife’s Sarong.” It’s based on a childhood memory. I had great fun then experimenting with different perceptions of an event, and so on. When I put them all together, I sent them to my publisher. And for some reason, this publisher said that they were not suitable for school. But obviously I didn’t want the collection to be a textbook. So I said it was for the general public. But even then they didn’t want to publish it. The second publisher wanted all the rights for life. And, well, I’ve become wiser now in terms of contracts, and I didn’t want that. So that deal was off. Then someone recommended Monsoon Publishers. It’s headed by an English man. And, at first, he was kind of reluctant because he said, generally, they don’t publish short story collections any more. But he was willing to apply for a co-publishing grant with the national arts council. And I thought, well, let’s see.

Do you think there was more to the reservations of the other publisher, your first publisher, than the stated objection that this wasn’t suitable for schools? Was it a reaction to the contentious issues with which you deal?

My previous short story collections dealt with standard topics and traditional values: with the tension between a non-materialistic person and a materialistic society, or the lack of filial piety in children, or the way we treated the elderly, or this striving for good fortune all the time, or the lack of love.

Ultimately your stories then weren’t sermon-like enough.

Yes, yes, yes. I think they dealt with topics that have been suppressed and quite close to home. And a lot of people don’t want to look at them. In our society it is acceptable if you are gay. We all know you are gay. But just don’t bring it up. Don’t make an issue of it. Just go and live your life. And we’ll pretend not to know it and that will be fine. The moment you start speaking out, then something else happens because then you brought it out in the open. As long as you don’t say anything, you know, it’s fine. I saw it when I was growing up. We all knew that these two women teachers were probably “something else” but nobody would make an issue of it. Nobody complained. You didn’t come out and say

anything. Or there were the two Amahs who were together, and they both adopted a daughter. Nothing would happen. We don't have a history of tarring gay people or sending them off to commit suicide. I think it is more, in a way, an avoidance of looking at something or talking about it. An avoidance. This collection puts these things gently on the table and puts them into words for you to read. And then the controversial occurrence was that this church invited me to read, one serving non-mainstream people and the other serving mainstream people. And then the community of Good Shepherd Sisters invited me to read. So then the words were not only on the page, but they were also out there.

One of my favourite sentences in the collection is "Singaporeans are a staid people." That comes from "The Man Who Wore his Wife's Sarong." And it seems to me from what you're saying that the publisher was worried....

Yes, because they are the biggest publisher in Singapore. And maybe they have a lot more to lose. I don't know. I mean, this is all speculation because none of these things were said or written anywhere. I can only speculate about why they wouldn't want to publish a prize-winning author, and obviously with interesting stories never published in Singapore before. I thought most publishers anywhere would want to do that.

One last question: why did you feel the need to write the postscript for the collection, describing its conception and publication history?

First, because it hadn't been done before. Second, because I thought of it not as my journey, but as the journey of these stories. And I thought it might be a great idea to trace *that* story for the readers after they had read all the stories. That's how they have been journeying so far. And maybe, to the reader, the implicit question is "Where will *you* take these stories?" And since then, these stories have opened doors for me elsewhere. It started off with an inclusive congregation, and I've been invited to talk to other people in non-church contexts, to young people, to the parents of gay children—all through this collection of stories.

Thank you very much.

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