Foreword

Ten years ago, Singapore topped a study of city walking speeds with an average rate of 6.15 km/hr. Thankfully, our walking speeds have since decreased but the urgency remains in our literary scene, which is moving faster than ever.

There is a greater diversity of writing in the Singapore novel. Nuraliah Norasid’s The Gatekeeper is an excellent piece of speculative fiction, Neil Humphrey’s Rich Kill Poor Kill is a gripping crime fiction novel, and Sithuraj Ponraj’s Bernoulli’s Ghost is a modern horror story set in the ubiquitous government flats.

Our writers navigate contemporary social settings, and investigate the past and future with confidence. Ovidia Yu’s The Frangipani Tree Mystery, Mahita Vas’s Rain Tree and Meira Chand’s The River examines pre-independence colonial Singapore, while Hassan Hasaa’ree Ali’s Souvenir from Outer Space explores an alternative world with robots and time travel.

Singaporean titles are crossing more borders, moving into new language markets via translation. Amanda Lee Koe’s Ministry of Moral Panic was translated into German, and Christine Suchen Lim’s Fistful of Colours into Macedonian. Forthcoming are Ma Elangkannan’s Flowers at Dawn and Isa Kamari’s The Tower in Turkish, and Emily Lim’s picture books in Slovak. This year we present Isa Kamari’s RAWA: Tragedy of White Rock Island, which was translated from Malay to Chinese – two of Singapore’s official languages – a testament of Singapore’s multiculturalism. At the same time, Singapore authors are increasingly moving around the literary festival circuit, receiving invitations from Edinburgh, Hong Kong, Ubud, and Jaipur.

Moving beyond print, we are also looking forward to more television shows based on local children’s fiction series – as well as film adaptations of Kevin Kwan’s Crazy Rich Asians and Balli Kaur Jaswal’s Erotic Tales for Punjabi Widows.

We trust that you will find within these pages stories worth reading, buying, translating and even adapting. These titles presented here are just a sliver of what Singapore literature has to offer, and we welcome you to find out more about our city and its many stories.

May Tan
Acting Director
Literary Arts, National Arts Council
Fiction Singapore 2017/2018

New Works

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English Titles
Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows

Hilarious and heartwarming, an east-meets-west novel for fans of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*

Every woman has a secret life...

When Nikki takes a creative writing job at her local temple, with visions of emancipating the women of the community she left behind as a self-important teenager, she’s shocked to discover a group of barely literate women who have no interest in her ideals.

Yet to her surprise, the white dupatta of the widow hides more than just their modesty. These are women who have spent their lives in the shadows of fathers, brothers and husbands; being dutiful, raising children and going to temple, but whose inner lives are as rich and fruitful as their untold stories. But as they begin to open up to each other about womanhood, sexuality, and the dark secrets within the community, Nikki realises that the illicit nature of the class may place them all in danger.

East meets West and tradition clashes with modernity in a thought-provoking cross-cultural novel that might make you look again at the women in your life.

‘Big-hearted, earthy and funny; turns so many preconceptions upside down and opens up a world that so many of us have only glimpsed. A rattlingly good story.’

— DEBORAH MOGGACH, THE BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL

‘Compulsive, funny and wonderfully original — this novel glows with witty sensuality. I love it.’

— HELEN LEDERER, LOSING IT

‘Poignant, intelligent yet wickedly funny — a delightful read that reignites one’s belief in the power of sisterhood.’

— JUNE SARPONG
Why did Mindi want an arranged marriage?

Nikki stared at the profile her sister had attached to the email. There was a list of relevant biographical details: name, age, height, religion, diet (vegetarian except for the occasional fish and chips). General preferences for a husband: intelligent, compassionate and kind, with strong values and a nice smile. Both clean-shaven and turban-wearing men were acceptable, provided beards and moustaches were neatly maintained. The ideal husband had a stable job and up to three hobbies which extended him mentally and physically. In some ways, she had written, he should be just like me: modest (a prude in Nikki's opinion), practical with finances (downright stingy) and family-oriented (wants babies immediately). Worst of all, the title of her blurb made her sound like a supermarket seasoning spice: Mindi Grewal, East-West Mix.

The narrow corridor connecting Nikki’s bedroom to the kitchenette was not suitable for pacing, with uneven floorboards that creaked in various pitches under the slightest contact. She travelled up and down the corridor nonetheless, gathering her thoughts in tiny steps. What was her sister thinking? Sure, Mindi had always been more traditional – once, Nikki had caught her watching an internet video on how to roll perfectly round rotis – but advertising for a groom? It was so extreme.

Nikki called Mindi repeatedly and was connected to voicemail each time. By the time she got through, the sunlight had leaked away into the dense evening fog and it was nearly time to leave for her shift at O’Reilly’s.

‘I know what you’re going to say,’ Mindi said.

‘Can you see it, Mindi?’ Nikki asked. ‘Can you actually picture this happening?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re insane, then.’

‘I’ve made this decision on my own. I want to find a husband the traditional way.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s what I want.’

‘Why?’

Original Extract

Balli Kaur Jaswal

Balli Kaur Jaswal was born in Singapore and has lived all around the world, including Australia, Japan, Russia, the Philippines, Turkey, the US and the UK, where she was a writer in residence at the University of East Anglia. Named Sydney Morning Herald Best Young Australian Novelist 2014, Balli Kaur Jaswal was also a finalist in the 2015 inaugural Epigram Books Fiction Prize. Her novel Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows was inspired by the time she spent in Southall, London.

She now lives in Singapore.
'It just is.'

'You need to come up with a better reason than that if you want me to edit your profile.'

'That’s unfair. I supported you when you moved out.'

'You called me a selfish cow.'

'But then when you left, and when Mum wanted to go to your place and demand that you come home, who convinced her to let it go? If not for me, she would never have accepted your decision. She’s over it now.'

'Almost over it,' Nikki reminded her. Time had worn on Mum's initial sense of outrage and stretched it threadbare. These days Mum was still deeply dissatisfied with Nikki’s lifestyle, but she had given up lecturing Nikki about the perils of living on her own. 'My own mother would not have dreamt of allowing this,' Mum always said to prove her progressiveness, a balance of boastfulness and lament in her tone. East-West Mix.

'I'm embracing our culture,' Mindi said. 'I see my English friends meeting men online and in nightclubs and they don't seem to be finding anyone suitable. Why not try an arranged marriage? It worked for our parents.'

'Those were different times,' Nikki argued. 'You've got more opportunities than Mum had at the same age.'

'I'm educated, I've done my nursing degree, I've got a job – this is the next step.'

'It shouldn't be a step. Acquiring a husband, that's what you're doing.'

'It's not going to be like that. I just want a bit of help to find him, but it's not like we're going to meet for the first time on our wedding day. Couples are allowed more time to get to know each other these days.'

Nikki balked at the word ‘allowed’. Why did Mindi need permission from anyone to take liberties with dating? 'Don't just settle. Do some travelling. See the world.'

'I've seen enough,' Mindi sniffed – a girls' trip to Tenerife last summer during which she had discovered her allergy to shellfish. 'Besides, Kirti is looking for a suitable boy as well. It's time for both of us to settle down.'

'Kirti couldn't spot a suitable boy if he came flying through her window,' Nikki said. 'I'd hardly consider her a serious competitor.' There was no love lost between Nikki and her sister’s best friend, a make-up artist, or Facial Enhancing Practitioner, according to her name card. At Mindi's twenty-fifth birthday party last year, Kirti had scrutinized Nikki's outfit and concluded, 'Being pretty is about making an effort though, innit?'

'Mindi, maybe you're bored.'

'Is boredom not a valid reason to try to find a partner? You moved out because you wanted independence. I'm looking to marry someone because I want to be a part of something. I want a family. You don't know it now, because you're still young. I get home after a long day at work and it's just Mum and me. I want to come home to somebody. I want to talk about my day and eat dinner and plan a life together.'

Nikki clicked open the email attachments. There were two close-ups of Mindi, her smile like a greeting, thick straight hair spilling past her shoulders. Another photo featured the whole family: Mum, Dad, Mindi and Nikki on their last holiday together. It wasn’t their best shot; they were all squinting and tiny against a wide landscape. Dad had died later that year, a heart attack snatching his breath at night like a thief.

A pang of guilt seized Nikki's stomach.

She closed the window.

'Don't use any family photos,' Nikki said. 'I don't want my image in any matchmaker’s files.'
'So you'll help me?'

'It's against my principles.' Nikki typed: 'arguments against arranged marriage' into a search engine and clicked on the first result.

'You'll help me, though?'

'The arranged marriage is a flawed system which undermines a woman's right to choose her destiny,' Nikki read aloud.

'Just make the profile sound better. I'm not good with that sort of thing,' Mindi said.

'Did you hear what I said?'

'Some radical rubbish. I stopped listening after "undermines".'

Nikki clicked back to the profile and spotted a grammatical error: 'I'm looking for my soulmate. Whose it going to be? She sighed. Clearly, Mindi's mind was made up – it was a matter of whether Nikki wanted to be involved or not.

'Fine,' she said.

'But only because you're at risk of attracting idiots with this profile. Why have you described yourself as “fun-loving”? Who doesn't love fun?'
Rich Kill Poor Kill

A crime thriller set in contemporary Singapore; the second instalment in the Inspector Stanley Low series

Few people care when a foreign worker is found dead in a back alley of Singapore. But there is a second murder, and another, and all subsequent victims are killed with the same weapon – a screwdriver. With its reputation as a safe and cosmopolitan city in ruins, Singapore struggles to come to terms with its first serial killer in decades. Then, the wife of a prominent blogger disappears, and terror grips the island.

Desperate, the authorities turn to Stanley Low, an angry detective who refuses to acknowledge his unconventional methods and bipolar disorder. His volatility makes him a poor choice, but he is the only man in the police force who can understand what drives a serial killer.

Under pressure from his superiors and the international media, Low has to race against time to stop the madman, even as his own declining mental state threatens to turn him into one himself.

Singapore’s bestselling author with more than 150,000 copies sold.

‘With razor-sharp dialogue, acerbic wit and a killer ending, Rich Kill Poor Kill is another superb entry in Singapore’s nascent crime-fiction genre.’

— ANDRE TEH, MY PAPER
Original Extract

Low was flying, gliding across the concrete, his feet barely touching the ground. He relished the kaleidoscope of colours dazzling before him, his brain fizzing like champagne, toasting his own brilliance. He was the Lone Ranger, the man in the white fucking hat, ready to ride in and save the day. Low lived for these moments. And these moments kept him alive.

He was reaching for the door, gripping the handle, one more step and he was in, ready for his cowering blogger, his cornered prey, his stepping stone to catching a madman. The IKEA Killer was about to kill again. And he was going to kill Harold Zhang; two birds, one stone.

Low was at the desk, fists pressed against the surface, glaring into terrified eyes before Chan had reached the police post.

“OK, man, where is he? Bring him out here.”

Low was shouting. His bipolar condition came with only two volume settings—loud or mute. The voice had no middle ground. Nor did the man.

“Er, who?”

The young officer appeared utterly distraught.


Get him out here.”

Chan almost fell through the door, breathless and drenched in perspiration. “Tea, prata, Geylang, Chinatown in 20 minutes cannot make it.”

“Yah lah, never mind that now.”

Low raised a hand to silence his colleague and turned back to the wide-eyed boy in the blue uniform with polished buttons. “Get him now.”

“Er, sorry ah, I need to see some ID first. You know, security, just in case, you are . . .”

“What? The killer? You think we ang mohs is it? Where did you study, the Braille school?”

Low pulled his ID from his wallet. “Look, there you go, Captain

Neil Humphreys

Kiasi. I’m Detective Inspector Stanley Low from Technology and this is Charlie Chan from the 1930s.”

“Stanley,” Chan interrupted. on the counter. “Mr Zhang came in all scared, waving this note. He had blood on his fingertips, from these blood streaks here on the note. They were still wet when he came in.”

“So the note was written just before,” Chan said.

“Yah lah, yah lah, OK, sorry for the sarcasm, Officer …” Low peered at the nameplate. “Razali Othman. Wah, you’re double screwed ah with a name like that in Singapore. Cannot be prime minister, cannot run the police force. But you can get me Harold Zhang.”

“Why take such a risk?”

“Don’t know. And then?” Low snapped.

“Mr Zhang got jittery. He was sweating, scared, running around, kept looking out of the window, saying that the killer was outside, waiting for him, shouting all the time. He was out there right now. So Mr Zhang said he had to get away.”

“And then?”

“I asked him to wait, have a cup of water while I called CID, obviously I knew this was serious.”

“Obviously.”

“But he just got too distracted and left while I was on the phone.”

Low heard an explosion behind his frontal lobe. He clenched his fists until the knuckles turned white. Through gritted teeth, his sarcastic smile came out all wrong, horrifying the policeman and alarming Chan. The inspector instinctively moved towards Low to protect Othman, but his sudden move had the opposite effect. Now the teenager had two inspectors towering over his desk, crushing his confidence.

Low spoke slowly. “Why did you let him go home?”

“You are the only officer working today?”

“No, sir.”

“So where were the others?”

“Outside. Our boss told us to watch the rally.”

“He asked if he could go home. And then he just left.”

Low was incredulous.

“Oh, is it? So if I ask to have sex with your sister, you’ll say yes?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Cannot leave the police post unattended, sir.”

“He said he was scared. He said the note was handwritten and left on the stage.”

Where is the note?” Chan asked.

“Uh it’s here under the desk.”

“Take your time,” Low said, as Othman found a pair of leather motorcyclist’s gloves to put on.

“The killer’s got all day.”

The uniformed officer laid out the note carefully

“Aiyoh, these buggers. If you were asked to think out of the box, would your head explode?”

“Sorry, sir, but my orders were to …”

“This isn’t Nazi Germany. You’re a policeman.”
Think for yourself.”

“Leave him, Stanley,” Chan said.

“Leave him? This idiot sends a guy back out into the arms of our serial killer and we’re supposed to do what exactly? Give him a promotion?”

“He was scared, sir, thought the killer was waiting for him,” Othman muttered.

“He was inside a fucking police post.”

“I’m sorry.”

Low eyeballed the chastised officer. “No, now you’re disappointed because you let him go. When he’s dead, then you can be sorry. When he’s been stabbed in the heart, then you have my permission to be sorry.”
Rain Tree

A story of hope and overcoming the odds, set in pre-Independence Singapore

A spirited young Malayan woman, Ani is forced into an arranged marriage with a gardener, trading in her dream of being a teacher with the narrow life of a servant girl. At Rain Tree, a colonial mansion in Singapore, she struggles with an abusive husband and a bigoted white mistress, while navigating the hierarchy and politics of servanthood. One thing remains the same: reading is her only solace. Then, she falls in love with a house guest from England and soon discovers she is pregnant.

Singapore, on the cusp of independence, faces chronic unemployment, housing shortages, and social unrest. Forced to leave Rain Tree, life is difficult for Ani, but with an illegitimate baby and no formal education, life outside will be impossible. Ani must change her destiny and is forced to make difficult choices, which come at an unimaginable price.
Original Extract

On a wet day in January 1962 at a small village temple in Johor, Malaya, a young bride struggled to maintain her composure while peers through her veil, scanning the audience in the run-down wedding hall. She rose from the dais and, joined to an older man by an embroidered silk sash in auspicious colours of crimson and gold, began the ritual walk around the sacred fire. She wondered if Agni, the fire deity, knew of its role as primary witness to the seven vows she and the groom were about to make. Her heart was as heavy as the bulky garland of marigold and jasmine around her neck. Cued by the priest, the bride and groom repeated their vows in Tamil at the beginning of each step around the flaming cauldron:

“We now make a vow together. We shall share love, share the same food, share our strengths, share the same tastes. We shall be of one mind; we shall observe our vows together. I shall be the Samaveda, you the Rigveda, I shall be the Upper World, you the Earth; I shall be the Sukhilam, you the Holder — together we shall live and have children, and other riches.”

In just a few moments, she would complete the seventh round of this hot, fiery walk and her marriage to her uncle would be solemnised. She wondered if Agni knew something about the groom, something she knew but no one else seemed to know, something about this man who was so vile and vicious he could not possibly have it in him to honour the vows.

When Ananda Uncle paid a surprise visit to Ani’s family two months earlier, he had promised exciting news. Ani had shuddered when her mother told her he would be visiting their house that night and was keen to see her. After dinner, she and her brothers were sent to an aunt’s house nearby for the Hinduism lessons they attended every Tuesday and Friday night.

Upon returning two hours later, Ani was disheartened to find her uncle still in the living room. As she walked towards the spartan bedroom she shared with her brothers, trying not to look at her father or her uncle, from the corner of her eye she caught Ananda Uncle leering at her.

“Eh, Ani! Come here! Come to your Uncle. Let me see how lovely you have become since I saw you last. Two years ago. Long time.” Ananda Uncle spoke in Tamil as he patted the seat next to him. She wanted to vomit, remembering his last visit while her father was away in Kuala Lumpur.

A hot afternoon in October 1959, several months after she had begun to bleed. She was thirteen and a half.

Mahita Vas

Mahita Vas was born in Singapore. Like many other Singaporean children with working parents, she was raised with the help of domestic workers. She continues to take a keen interest in migrant workers’ issues and also advocates for mental health awareness. She wrote a memoir Praying to the Goddess of Mercy (2012), which chronicles her struggles with mental illness. Rain Tree is her first novel.
That day, Ananda Uncle had arrived from Singapore. Ani was sitting on the sofa, reading *Little Women*, one of dozens of books her English teacher Mrs Matthews had lent her. Her mother was minding the provision shop, while her father was in the capital stocking up on his inventory for the upcoming Deepavali, the Hindu festival of lights. The people were in a buoyant mood, as they usually were before any festival. Ani's father expected a high demand for celebratory essentials such as ghee, sugar, rice, flour, milk powder, coconut oil, fruit cordials, Guinness Stout, sandalwood, incense sticks and clay oil lamps. Her brothers were at the park, playing rounders.

Ananda Uncle had appeared from his rest in her parents’ room and had planted himself next to her, his thigh brushing against hers. He is too close, she thought, as she felt goose bumps on her arms. Before she could react, he lifted her dress and touched her between her legs, two fingers forcing their way into her underwear, stroking her before forcefully parting her. What is he doing? Oh God, help me. Please! What is he doing? She felt bolted to the sofa, dumbstruck, and tried to keep his fingers out of her most private area by squeezing her legs together and squirming constantly. It did not help; he seemed to relish the resistance. Her skinny thighs and the loose elastic around the edges of her underwear, worn with age and countless scrubs on a washing board, only made it easier for him. As he forced his finger into her, she screamed. Or thought she did. There was no sound.

Through heavy tears, she saw her uncle smile. His finger went a little deeper inside. She jolted and arched her back. She was now sobbing. He licked her cheek, wet and salty from her tears, as he removed his hand from her underwear.

He leant back against the sofa. Ani tried to run, but he grabbed her arm.

“Not finish. You stay!” He pulled her back down onto the sofa and pulled her ear towards his mouth. “You stay! Understand?” His wet tongue circled inside her ear.
The Frangipani Tree Mystery

A historical crime novel set in 1930s Singapore

*The Frangipani Tree Mystery* is set in the Crown Colony of Singapore in 1936, when the British abdication crisis and rising Japanese threat seem far away.

When the nanny looking after the Acting Governor's daughter dies suddenly, Mission-School-educated local girl Su Lin – an aspiring journalist trying to escape an arranged marriage – takes her place. But then another murder at the residence occurs and it takes all of Su Lin's traditional skills and intelligence to help British-born Chief Inspector Thomas LeFroy solve the murders – and escape with her own life.

For her second Aunty Lee novel, Yu has cooked up another tasty mystery.'
— NEW YORK TIMES

'A delicious debut! Aunty Lee’s Delights is no mere whodunnit – it sparkles with insight into the traditions and moral complexities of modern Singapore. Rosie Lee is a terrifically original heroine.'
— LOUISE PENNY, AUTHOR OF THE BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY
Original Extract

The Honorable Miss Vanessa Palin was the sister of Singapore’s Acting Governor Sir Henry Palin, currently based in Government House on Frangipani Hill. Sir Henry represented British Colonial Authority in Singapore and Nessa Palin represented Sir Henry. Chief Inspector LeFroy might be head of the Singapore Police, but like everyone else on the island, he was subject to the Crown and Colonial Authority.

“Oh no, Inspector. Of course this is convenient. You have an appointment after all. It seems impossible to get some local people to understand how to make and keep appointments.” Miss Nessa threw a triumphant look at my uncle. She had never doubted her victory but it was still nice to see rivals crumble as reinforcements arrived. Uncle Chen did not crumble. He locked strong plump fingers around my arm and started to pull me towards the exit, muttering rude things under his breath. I didn’t know whether Uncle Chen had recognized LeFroy, but LeFroy was an ang moh – a white man – and Uncle Chen did not trust ang mohs. Miss Nessa grabbed my other arm, effectively stopping progress.

“I don’t know what the man is going on about,” Miss Nessa’s voice rose to drown out Uncle Chen’s angry protest.

“Can’t you get one of your men to put him out? You’re supposed to be keeping order in this place. Can’t you make sure we’re not bothered by gaga natives?”

“He’s threatening to come back and burn down the mission building if you try to keep his dead brother’s orphan daughter here.” LeFroy translated calmly.

I noticed he had kept the more colorful parts of my uncle’s tirade to himself, not telling Miss Nessa she had been called an immoral white ghost, a tigress and more useless than what comes out of the hind end of a chicken that no longer lays eggs. Nonetheless I was impressed by his language skills. I was even more impressed when he turned to my uncle and said in flawless Hokkien,

“It’s against the law to burn down buildings, Sir.”

Uncle Chen paused to assess him, still suspicious but somewhat mollified by his respectful use of ‘Sir’. Most ang mohs demanded respect without giving it. I saw Uncle Chen focus his attention on LeFroy, sniffing like a suspicious guard dog trying to decide whether to bite. Many Chinese people said ang mohs smelled of dead cows because of all the beef they ate so maybe he was smelling that too.

“Who are you?”

Ovidia Yu

Ovidia Yu has had over thirty plays produced in Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. She received a Fulbright Scholarship to the University of Iowa’s International Writing Programme.

“My name is Thomas LeFroy. I am a police officer. I am here to protect you. What name can I call you?”

“You can call me Chen. If you are a police officer then you better tell this unmarried white she-devil to give me back my dead brother's daughter!”

LeFroy returned to Nessa and the English language, “Miss Palin, have you taken Mr. Chen's niece away from her family?”

“Don’t be absurd, Inspector. Why would I want to take away his niece? I am only trying to help her! Su Lin, tell the Inspector what your family is trying to do to you!”

They all turned and looked at me. I could easily act the part each expected of me, but I had shown these people such very different sides of myself that for a moment I couldn't think of anything to say to all of them together. I froze.

“She’s shy.” Miss Nessa said confidently. “And besides she's scared of her uncle. He wants to marry her off to some dirty old man.”

“Your name is Su Lin? This man is your uncle?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You can speak English. I assume you were translating for them?”

“I was, Sir. But I couldn't keep up—”

Since he had heard them shouting there was no need to continue.
The Gatekeeper

In an ever-shifting world, how do you carry on when you can literally turn people to stone?

A young medusa named Ria petrifies an entire village of innocents with her gaze. Together with her sister, she flees for the underground city of Nelhoote, where Manticura’s quasi-fantastical sapient races – Scereans, Tuyuns, Feleneese, Cayanese – live on the margins. There, she takes up her role as gatekeeper, protecting the city from threats Human or otherwise.

Decades later, Manticura has become a modern urban city, and a man named Eedric is bored with the monotony of his privileged life. He stumbles upon the entrance to Nelhoote and encounters Ria, who has spent nearly sixty years in solitude. As their friendship begins to blossom, external whispers of the medusa sisters threaten to spark a chain of events that will throw Nelhoote and its inhabitants into imminent danger.

Winner of the 2016 Epigram Books Fiction Prize

‘Extremely well written, revealing a real flair for expressive language. The speculative elements are well integrated, and it incorporated Malay and European mythological and cultural elements in realising figures such as the medusa sisters. The strange familiarity of the world of the novel and its relationship to issues of cultural marginalisation in contemporary Singapore were intriguing.’

— PHILIP HOLDEN, EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE 2016 JUDGE
The sisters jerked their heads up, lifting startled gazes to the room's ceiling before Barani tackled Ria and pressed her down to the floor. Barani's body covered hers, her sister's hands over her ears. In those first moments of the war's onslaught, it was Ria who froze, her gaze locked on the bit of wall in front of her in the shack they were occupying at the time, behind Pak Arlindi's house. Later as the war progressed, food rations and fuel had to be smuggled in, the black market began its cutthroat trades, and, as if everything else had to be shadow-swallowed, the lamps outside were permanently switched off so that travel in the settlement needed to be aided by hand-carried lights, apertures opened just a slit. Enlistment offices no longer cared what race you were or if your papers were genuine, so long as you were old enough to hold a gun or at least look legal doing it. Men like Acra left for the surface in droves to fight.

Ria had no friends among the other children, but Acra had always been there for her. Then he married a human whom Ria thought very plain looking. The wedding day had been a simple affair. It was no time to be decadent. Ria had not wanted to go but Barani made her. And when she'd been dragged to the dais where the couple was seated to bestow blessings, Barani said loudly to Ria, “Dah, enough already. He is getting married already. What for face long-long?” Ria could feel Barani's smirk and almost see the gleam in her violet eyes.

Ria had mumbled her blessings to the couple's sandaled feet and would have left for the far end of the tikar if Acra had not called after her. She could not look at him at first, but the gravity of Acra's eyes forced her to meet them. She peered up to see Acra and Kak Manyari smiling at her. Something about Acra's smile made her believe him when he said, “Later, when Ria is big, confirm got a lot of admirers.”

Had made her believe he was coming back.

Ria was with Kak Manyari, helping her burp her daughter when she later watched him leave with Gemir. The only reason he gave for enlisting was “Manticura is my country too.” A smile, a cocky two-fingered movie star salute, and he was gone, a simple cloth bag slung across his body.

No news of him came during the two years the fighting went on. Then Gemir came home, an arm mangled and a part of his face burnt away, leaving an eye blind. Ria was outside Kak Manyari's hut, holding in her hand the single cassava Kak Manyari had told her to bring to Barani, as she watched him limp forward.
He absently ran his good hand through her hair, either not noticing the serpents or simply not caring. Kak Manyari came to the door, tiny now that the rough years had picked her flesh right off the bone and tinier as she peered around the large man’s body. Gemir must have known who she was searching for and in answer, he pressed something into Kak Manyari’s hand. The woman stood still for a beat before thanking him and disappearing back into the house.

Kak Manyari’s sobbing recalled Ria to Gemir’s limping walk – the sound of his footsteps having been the first tap and stutter of an unhappy message from an already unhappy world.

Ria stared after Gemir as he left, returning perhaps to his own world of pain now that he’d delivered another’s right into their hands. Inside, Kak Manyari had her back to the door, putting away dried plates into a small cupboard by the makeshift stove, her movements near frantic. There weren’t a lot of plates to put away. There wasn’t much to clean off of them after a meal either. When she was done, she took them out, even the ones she hadn’t used, only to put them back in again.

Ria went over and made to help. Kak Manyari looked and seeing Ria, she pointed to the cassava root, saying kindly with a shaky smile, “Ria, go home lah. Cook the cassava. Later, Bara scold you again.”

Ria didn’t reply. She finished putting all the plates away and, once done, took Acra’s name badge and sealed envelopes, crumpled and smudged in dark dirt, from where they had fallen on Kak Manyari’s lap. She pressed them into Kak Manyari’s hands, closing her fingers over them. Ria knew that when Kak Manyari focused on her face, the woman was wishing Ria’s eyes would do to her what they had the power to do. Ria glanced at the little girl who was asleep on the mat, prone on her front, a pudgy fist at her mouth and appearing very human save for the body covering of scales and the cleft that ran along her head instead of hair. She was still in the middle of moulting, so there were bits of translucent honeycomb skin stuck to her, just waiting for a good scrub in the bath. Kak Manyari blinked hard once, like a woman clearing her eyes, before squeezing them shut to let herself cry.
Unpublished English Manuscripts
The Man in the Blue Mao Jacket

To fulfill her grandmother’s dying wish, a young Singaporean woman goes in search of her missing grandfather.

A lonely journalism student in Chicago, Lynn begins getting calls from her grandmother who, in the fog of dementia, has started asking for her husband again after years of silence. Thrilled and disturbed that the family secret has finally been dredged up, Lynn wonders if there is more to the unexplained disappearance of the man who left his family in 1940 to work as a cook on an America-bound ship.

The only things that tie her grandfather to her, however, are a photo of him in a blue Mao jacket and an uncanny physical resemblance. When her grandmother’s health takes a turn for the worse, Lynn ditches graduation day to chase the biggest story of her life: who was her grandfather and why did he abandon them?

*The Man in the Blue Mao Jacket* follows a young woman through Chicago, California, Singapore, and Hainan as she navigates familial secrets and personal doubts. Will she ever uncover the mystery or will she be doomed to wonder forever?

Jessica Tan

Jessica Tan is a Forbes Asia contributing writer and a journalism lecturer at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. She is an alumnus of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. Over the span of her 15-year career, she has also worked as an entertainment reporter and business newswire journalist. Her most memorable assignments include spending a day with Warren Buffett in Omaha, Nebraska and swimming with whale sharks in Western Australia.

Tan also writes short stories, one of which won Honourable Mention at the Golden Point Award (Singapore) in 2013 and another published in *Twenty Two New Asian Short Stories* (2016). *The Man in the Blue Mao Jacket* is her first novel.
The River

A mother and daughter journey through what it means to be a woman

The stories of Sita and her daughter Amita unfold concurrently: the present narrative is set in Singapore in the year 2000, and the past narrative begins in the 1940s, first in India and then Singapore and Burma during the Second World War.

Sita, an illiterate woman, embarks on an inner journey to awareness and empowerment, and on an outer journey as a woman soldier with the Indian National Army. Many years later, her daughter Amita is dealing with traumatic events in her own life when she stumbles upon a mystery in her mother’s.

Praise for A Different Sky...

‘Chand proves herself a master of the modern Asian epic in this tale … she endows her characters with humanity and complexity, … grounding … their histories in solid research, and she offers a credible, compelling panorama of the tragedy and resilience, culture and individuality, political evolution, dissolution, and renaissance of 20th-century Singapore.’

— PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW, SEPTEMBER 2011

‘… a panoramic page-turner … The epic sweep …[of] … this meticulously researched book is alive with engaging detail …’

— THE GUARDIAN, 2 OCTOBER 2010

Meira Chand

Meira Chand is the author of eight novels, most notably A Choice of Evils (1996) and A Different Sky (2011). Of Indian-Swiss parentage, she was born and educated in London and has lived extensively in Japan and India. In 1997, she moved to Singapore and became a citizen in 2011. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Western Australia. She wrote the story from which the hit production The LAT Musical was developed. More about her books can be found on www.meirachand.com.