



CULTURAL MEDALLION 2023

## SUCHEN CHRISTINE LIM



At the Ambassadors' Wives Reading Club,  
Singapore, 2014.

Photo courtesy of Suchen Christine Lim

SUCHEN CHRISTINE LIM (b. 1948) extended the boundaries of the Singapore novel during her four decades of writing. Her critically acclaimed body of work depicts the complexities of Singaporean society and its diverse cultural and linguistic tensions. Set against significant historical events, her fiction chronicles the inner lives of unsung Singaporeans, from rickshaw pullers and evicted vendors to Cantonese opera artistes and women struggling against domestic violence.

Her debut novel 'Rice Bowl' (1984) is a landmark novel on post-independent Singapore that captures a young nation's rebellious spirit in the early 1970s. 'Fistful of Colours' (1993), a multi-layered work exploring ethnic identity, mixed race marriage, and artistic freedom, won the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize. The book, one of 10 classic Singapore novels, was an A-Level Literature text. 'The River's Song' (2014), set against the social upheaval caused by the cleaning of the Singapore River, was selected by Kirkus Reviews (USA) as one of "100 Best Books of 2015." Her latest work, 'Dearest Intimate' (2022), about the brutality and tenderness of relationships in the world of Chinese opera and life during the Japanese Occupation, won critical praise.

Her fiction was translated into other languages such as Arabic and Macedonian. A short story, 'The Morning After', was adapted for national television. 'Writing The City', a short film series by the British Council, featured Suchen. Her works are the subject of literary research and undergraduate theses.

She had served as a Judge for the Commonwealth Literature Prize, and was on the judging panels of literary awards in Singapore. An Arts Advisor to the National Arts Council for many years, she mentored writers in the NUS Creative Arts Programme. In 2004 she was Writer-in-Residence in Scotland, and in 2008 she was Writing Tutor at the Moniack Mhor Writing Centre.

In 2012 Suchen received the S.E.A. Write Award, one of the highest forms of recognition for writers in South-east Asia. In 2014, she received the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame Award. The recipient of a Fulbright grant, Suchen was a Fellow of the International Writing Program, University of Iowa. She was also the university's Singaporean International Writer-in-Residence. In 2014, she was the Visiting Fellow in Creative Writing at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.



## HER VISION OF WHAT THINGS CAN BE

BY ASSOC PROF ANGELIA POON

“One day, there will be a novel with Singapore history.”<sup>1</sup>

This memorable line is the reason Suchen Christine Lim gives for her motivation to write her most acclaimed novel, *Fistful of Colours* (1993). A sceptic had once wondered if Singapore had any history worth writing about, and Suchen, always ready for a challenge, was determined to prove him wrong. Not only did she produce a novel that vividly dramatised the complexity of the nation’s immigrant multicultural past, she also went on to win the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992. Since then, the novel has been an A-level text and is studied in Singapore literature courses in universities here and abroad.

In a career spanning four decades, Suchen is one of the most significant writers of Singaporean literature. Committed to prose and literary fiction, she has produced a substantial and critically acclaimed body of work – six novels, a book of short stories, a work of non-fiction, and numerous children’s books. Her first novel, *Rice Bowl* (1984), is what



Photo of Suchen’s lodging at Moniack Mhor, during her residency in Scotland, 2005.

Photo courtesy of Suchen Christine Lim

she laughingly calls her “accidental novel,” based on her experience of student idealism and activism at the University of Singapore and one that she wrote to prove to herself that she could be a novelist.<sup>2</sup>

From this debut novel to her latest, *Dearest Intimate* (2022), Suchen’s work has forged new trajectories for narrative storytelling through her interest in Singapore, Malayan and South-east Asian histories and her commitment to exploring multiculturalism and interculturalism. Winner of the S.E.A. Write Award in 2012, Suchen writes mainly works of historical fiction based on meticulous research. To understand the intricacies of Cantonese opera for *Dearest Intimate*, she attended classes in Chinatown on literary Cantonese; and as part of her attempt to comprehend the polyphony of 19th-century colonial Malaya in *A Bit of Earth* (2001), she attended talks at the Muslim Converts’ Association of Singapore in order to learn more about Islam and Malay culture.

Suchen is aware of the unique gift of literature to plug the gaps of recorded history, drawn especially to the stories of women and those from marginalised and less privileged communities who are hardly mentioned or reside only in the footnotes of the official records.

It was in solidarity with them that she invoked the trauma of the illiterate and dialect-speaking individuals whose lives were overturned by the clean-up of the Singapore River in her novel, *The River’s Song* (2014). Her empathy for the suffering of poor Chinese immigrants – those who left their homes due to war and famine in order to labour in strange lands – is evident in many of her novels like *Fistful of Colours*, *A Bit of Earth*, and *Dearest Intimate*. It is also captured in her non-fictional tome, *Hua Song: Stories of the Chinese Overseas* (2005), a snapshot documentary record of diasporic Chinese communities around the world commissioned by Hua Song Museum.

Against the backdrop of momentous historical events, Suchen explores with nuance and sensitivity the complexities of individual subjectivity, particularly of the female persuasion. The split-narrative strategy she employs for her historical fiction, with parallel stories of the past and the present unfolding in an interleaved manner, provides a bifocal perspective for readers to appreciate continuities between the past and the present as well as the dynamic relationship between individual agency and larger external forces. At the same time, ever alert to the complicated legacies of the past and the presence of inter-generational trauma, Suchen’s writing often bristles with the tension between the spoken and the silence of the unspeakable.

With her penchant for creating unforgettably fearless female characters who often brave physical harm and social disapproval for resisting ethnic, gender or sexual norms, it is no surprise that Suchen admires women writers whom she regards as “quietly strong”<sup>3</sup>: George Eliot (pen-name of Mary Ann Evans), the pre-eminent English novelist of social realism; and Pak Kyong-ni, one of South Korea’s most acclaimed 20th-century novelists and the founder of the Toji Cultural Centre.



At the launch of 'Dearest Intimate', 2022.  
Photo courtesy of Suchen Christine Lim

Suchen's belief in the importance of having a voice can be traced to her childhood. Born in Ipoh, she grew up in a Cantonese-speaking household where the only book available was the Chinese almanac. Her grandparents, whom she describes as "brilliant liars and storytellers,"<sup>24</sup> were her earliest influences when it came to creating worlds with words.

At six, Suchen was thrust into an English-speaking environment when her mother enrolled her in a convent school in Penang. Unable to comprehend anything, the young Suchen was effectively mute. With the help of a tutor, she began to grasp the English language. When she was 14, she experienced another level of culture shock when she moved to Singapore and was exposed to Western culture.

Those early years of learning to navigate languages and cultural spheres informed Suchen's interest in Singapore's multilingual and multicultural heritage.<sup>5</sup> In her writing, for example, she has consistently examined the differences in the worldviews and value systems between the two main groups of ethnic Chinese Singaporeans – the so-called 'Chinese-educated' and 'English-educated'. Through a deft and inventive use of dialogue, Suchen attempts to convey the country's heterogeneity to Anglophone readers, thus building bridges across the borders of languages.

Suchen's friendly demeanour and infectious laughter belie her bold vision as a writer whose mission is to bring the stories of the socially marginalised to life. The novel form with its inherently dialogic nature suits her well – she has adapted it to realise her literary ambition by depicting interracial and multicultural relations. She invites her readers to contemplate what it means when cultural worlds collide, be it in tense moments of racial conflict or in the unexpected intimacies between individuals.

Another notable feature of Suchen's writing is how her fiction becomes the hospitable host of multiple art forms –visual art and sculpture in 'Fistful of Colours', Western classical and traditional Chinese music in 'The River Song', and Cantonese opera in 'Dearest Intimate'. Through the stories of her many creative and artistic characters, she shows us how art and creative expression are vital for what she calls the "survival of the human soul."<sup>26</sup>

Like her artistically-inclined protagonists, Suchen is equally unwavering in her commitment to her craft, always making time and space for writing even as she worked as a teacher, an educator and a civil servant. Indeed, she brought her writerly skill to many school textbooks and children's books which continue to be used today in English-language classrooms.

In Singapore, she has served as a mentor for the Creative Arts Programme and was the NTU-NAC Writer-In-Residence at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in 2011. Suchen's writing life has also been enriched by overseas residencies in the Philippines, Myanmar, South Korea, Vietnam, the United States, Australia, and Scotland, which



School visit as Writer-in-Residence at Gairloch High School, Scotland, 2005.  
Photo courtesy of Suchen Christine Lim

gave her the opportunity to serve as a cultural ambassador for Singapore. She was twice at the University of Iowa's prestigious International Writing Program (IWP), once in 1996 as Fulbright Writing Fellow, and again in 2000 as International Writer-in-Residence.

Reflecting her commitment to literature as the highest aesthetic embodiment of language, she extols the role of literary fiction to illuminate truths about humanity, culture, and society. To that end, Suchen has expressed a fearless desire for more daring critics and a robust scene for literary criticism in Singapore. As testimony to the strength and integrity of her oeuvre, she advocates for a deeper emotional and intellectual maturity. Her novels have greatly enriched Singapore literature in the way they consistently challenge her readers to ponder profound questions about history, national life, individual agency, and the extent of cultural understanding – concerns which resonate far beyond our shores and the present moment.

Asked about what inspires her to write, Suchen pauses before sharing how the spark can be as seemingly insignificant as a dream she has had, or an intense feeling of injustice prompting "a vision of what things can be."<sup>27</sup>

This ability to boldly envision a future, often through confronting the past, is the hallmark of Suchen as a writer, and our reward as her readers.

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At the Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange (WrICE), 2023.  
Photo courtesy of Suchen Christine Lim

- 1 Interview. Conducted 7 September 2023.
- 2 Interview. Conducted 7 September 2023.
- 3 Interview. Conducted 7 September 2023.
- 4 Interview. Conducted 7 September 2023.
- 5 Suchen Christine Lim. "Letter to a Professor on Living a Life of the Imagination in Singapore," *Singapore Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, Eds. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks (Serdang Selangor: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press, 2002), p. 412-416.
- 6 Interview. Conducted. 7 September 2023.
- 7 Interview. Conducted. 7 September 2023.

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- 'Dearest Intimate' (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2022)



## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I stumbled into writing in my late 30s when I was already a mother of two. In my youth I had neither the dream nor ambition to practise this literary art form. On the night when Mr Rajaratnam, Singapore's first Minister of Foreign Affairs, presented me with the trophy and the vase, made by master potter Iskandar Jalil, as part of the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize, a thousand swallows were fluttering in my heart.

Today I look back with gratitude to those who had conceptualised and supported such national literary awards. They understood that the literature of a nation is the manifestation of its humanity and history. Reading the novels, poetry and short stories of Singapore helps readers to understand this country beyond the news of its politics and economy. Reading the literary works of one's nation is like listening to her heartbeat.

I thank the two storytellers in my childhood, my Cantonese grandparents, who had imbued me with a sense of the magic of narrative.

Next I thank my mother for her audacious choice to go against my grandparents when she sent me, a six-year-old, to the CHIJ school where I first encountered stories told in English instead of Cantonese. My mother's choice thus set me on the path to writing in English.

Although novelists work in solitude, they also need the network of family, friends and community. I thank my family especially my two sons for their steadfast support, and my friends for their acceptance of this writer's periodic self-doubt.

Finally, I thank the literary community especially the younger writers who continue to value my work, and the large community of unknown readers whose reading, buying and borrowing sustained the growth and development of this country's literature, especially the Singapore novel in English.