

An Interview with Cyril Wong

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Cyril Wong was born in Singapore on June 27, 1977 and attended St Patrick's School and Temasek Junior College. He went on to study English Literature at the National University of Singapore and obtained a PhD degree in the subject in 2012. Wong started writing while serving his National Service. During his third year in the University, he published his debut collection of poems, *Squatting Quietly* (2000). Cyril Wong is the Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of poetry (2006) and a recipient of National Arts Council's Young Artist Award for Literature (2005). He has twelve collections of poetry, one collection of short stories and a novel. His poems have appeared in journals around the world, including *Atlanta Review*, *Fulcrum*, *Poetry International*, *Cimarron Review* and *Wascana Review*. His poems have also been anthologised in *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia and Beyond* (W.W. Norton, 2008) and *Chinese Erotic Poems* (Everyman's Library, 2007). Wong was a featured poet at the Edinburgh International Book Festival (2002), the Hong Kong International Literary Festival (2005), the Sydney Writers' Festival (2005) and the Singapore Writers' Festival (2005-2014). He is the founder of the online poetry journal, *Softblow* (2004).

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Cyril Wong has been identified as a confessional poet in *The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry* on the basis of the “brutally candid sexuality in his poetry, along with a barely submerged anxiety over the fragility of human connection and a relentless self-querying” (662-3). However, many academics have rightly noted Wong’s constant evolution as a writer and commented on the ways in which his work combines “the anecdotal and the confessional with the intuitive and the empathetic” (Patke and Holden 185). Emeritus Professor Edwin Thumboo, who is one of the pioneers of English poetry in Singapore, has praised Cyril’s poems for their “remarkable inwardness” and how, “without exception, they leave us with the feeling of subjects – occasion, non-happening, an especially poignant experience – explored to unusual limits” (9). Singaporean critic Gwee Li Sui has stressed how “his qualities of spaciousness and morphing images” manifest an interest in a “New-Age irreligious spirituality” (250). Well-known academic, critic and writer, Kirpal Singh has pinpointed how “a heightened awareness of the physical body, and a desire to probe its visceral materiality for emotional truths” in his works has made Cyril Wong a distinctive voice in the Singapore poetry scene (109).

Poet Timothy Liu has called Wong’s “transpacific sensibility a fine refreshment” (7). Lewis Warsh, one of the principal members of the second generation of New York School poets has described Wong’s poetry as “evocative and sensual” and “untainted by bitterness” (6). In his review of Wong’s collection of poems, *Unmarked Treasure*, Robert Yeo has commented on the framing devices in his work that “deliberately blur distinctions between the real (Cyril Wong) and the persona (the poet who ‘wonders at his own existence’). The result is a distancing that layers the poems and renders them more fraught and complex and encourages, indeed demands, repeated reading” (“Death is a Ceremony”).

Cyril Wong has served as a mentor under the Creative Arts Programme and the Mentor Access Project, as well as a judge for the Golden Point Awards and a creative-writing instructor at Pelangi Village in Singapore.

In this interview with Cyril Wong about his new novel, *The Last Lesson of Mrs. De Souza* (Epigram Books, 2013), the author talks about the challenges he faced with his first venture as a novelist and the emotional investment of writing about his main character, a teacher, who is based very closely on a teacher who taught him in his primary school years. Commenting on the subject matter of the novel, Cyril says how writing on the gay subject was an afterthought; the story is really about social conditioning of children in an educational system which relentlessly urges them to belong, and in this process forces them into repressive silence. When asked if literature can change lives and the way in which we perceive social issues, he emphasised how Singapore writers must think beyond the issues that currently hold their attention, and be

ready to delve into the smaller but significant everyday challenges in the lives of an average Singaporean.

This is your first novel. What made you turn from poetry to the novel?

It is quite a one-off thing. I always had this idea to write a short work about teachers of the past – teachers whom I thought were excellent teachers when I was younger but who were really very problematic, I realised. The older I got, the more I understood about my teachers. I realised that they were very, very challenging figures; people full of illusions about themselves that anyone alert enough could see, you know. I wanted to write a poem about them and... not really to criticise because I really don't feel I am in any real place to judge. We all have our own conditioning. I wanted to talk about my own idea of what it is to live according to a story about oneself that is ultimately ideal, or at least a story that will be ultimately imperfect or full of holes about what we are, what "I" is, which is ultimately very flawed... that is something I am struggling with in my own life as well.

I wanted to write about particular illusions. I used a conflation of a few teachers.... and use them as a springboard to see what it means to be a teacher in Singapore. What it means to be this kind of teacher in an education system that aims to produce only certain kinds of students.

But I wanted to think bigger. I didn't want to write a Singapore novel. It is not about Singapore alone. Not once in the novel do I mention Singapore; neither do I use Singlish. I am very clear about that. It is about bigger themes. The novel can be located anywhere.

What does it mean to write a story of your own life in your head? We all do that whether we are writers or not. We all have a story about who we are: what gender we are, what experiences we have... all sorts of stories and narratives we allow ourselves to believe in and create as we go along.

And what happens when death complicates it? What does any story mean in relation to death?

It was an ambitious project, I realised. I wrote many things (laughs). They all didn't work out. Tried many genres. Short story, for example. But it didn't contain all that I wanted to say. So it got longer and longer.

This had never happened to me before. Most of the time, I can say what I want to say in a single page but this time, I wanted to commemorate a character and bring this person to life. It is based first on one person, then many other people as well... an eventual female figure began to take shape. I started to have dreams about her – even standing in front of the glass door and talking to me.

But I realised I couldn't go on about the teacher. I needed a foil to this

person to realise she is doing something wrong. Then I sneaked in the “gay” aspect.

The person I mostly base my character on passed away more than four, five years ago. I feel that no one really understood her. As a teacher, she was downright terrible, really terrible. As a personality, what she taught us was everything other than the subject. She taught us how to be true to ourselves, to break through prejudice, all that, but yet she remained very flawed herself.

There is a significant difference between the way you write your poems, and I am thinking of your most recent collection, After You, that you read out from during its launch, and this novel. The words are precise, images are concrete. Even though there is a fair amount of poetry in your novel, this is not sustained. What was your main challenge in using the novel form to convey your impressions of this teacher?

I have bad memory (laughs). When you are writing a novel, you need memory for what went before in the novel – what this character was doing, etc. The pain of having to re-read everything was very annoying. It was hell. Without the help of my editor, I don’t know how I would have survived. That was the challenging part.

Other than that, I realised that I could not simply pass this person off as a self-deluded, crazy woman. The tendency was there. I had to continually resist it. I needed to have a balance. She was problematic but also very human. There were many inspiring qualities in her. That was the main challenge.

When I read the novel, I got the impression that this person felt obliged to be responsible for her students. She did not see herself as a person communicating with others. It is always a teacher communicating with her students. This is what drove her to do many things that she did.

This was a bit of a stretch for me. I was trying to suggest, not too overtly perhaps, the absence of children in her life. For me, with regard to the teacher I based it on, having been to her house and everything, I realised that she didn’t have a great relationship with her own children. Being a teacher allowed her to play the awe-inspiring, mother-to-all kind of person. So I wanted to reflect that real-life person, especially that element of an over-compensatory gesture.

For me, the novel is primarily about the relativity of perceiving truth, morality and social acceptance. When the self is at loggerheads with societal expectations, it is always the individual that suffers. Could this be the moral focus of the novel?

It is a novel about social conditioning. We cannot run away from the gay topic. In our society, the homosexual is extremely disempowered, especially when he

is young, because of his age, his circumstances and his dependence. The homosexual has to survive in his family first, before he survives society. There are too many suicides – all young lesbians, gays, all races. All this played out in my mind. So I wanted to write about it.

The suicide here is not a random case. It is the horrific reality of our society. This kind of a thing should not happen, at least not today. There was a time when once people found out about homosexuals, they could get killed. Uganda is becoming like that again, it seems. It was very frightening. Suicide is frightening. I have been through that struggle. I survived it. But I didn't want this to be a story about survival.

Is this why Amir must die? But before you answer this question, I want to ask you about your choice of the adolescent's race? Why did you choose a Muslim boy?

There is almost a repressive silence in Singapore about Muslim experiences of homosexuality. Lots of Chinese homosexuals talk about their experiences, but for Muslims and Hindus, it is taboo. This sense of taboo is overwhelming. I find it very sad. I am sure they struggle more than others, coming from a different background.

So I wanted to do something here for that. But at the same time, what I wanted to do was something very symbolic with regard to Amir. He is an invisible figure. He is a shadow. We can't know him. I wanted that to represent how I as a Chinese person view the Other. Do I really know the Other? I am trying to know, but my knowledge is extremely imperfect. I am in no position to represent him. So this is my way out. But I also wanted readers to feel sympathy for Amir. I did not want Amir's story to overshadow Mrs. De Souza's story. I wanted readers to feel a little frustrated. I wanted them to say "What are you doing? I want to know Amir."

Why don't the other writers want to write about it? Is it because it has something to do with religion?

There are people who would criticise me for doing this. But when I ask them to write about it themselves, they give me lots of reasons why they don't want to. So who will write?

The simple idea is that I am a Chinese person writing about a Malay boy. The controversy is already there. Who am I to say anything? What right do I have to do this? I don't want to close off any argument. I want to leave the questions open.

But why must Amir die? You said earlier that you did not want this to be a story of survival but couldn't it have been a failure of another kind? Why death?

I didn't want Mrs. De Souza to get away with her self-narrative. I did not want her to rest easy thinking she did the right thing.

That is why there is the final letter from Amir which she finds in her drawer after many years. That letter came as a shock to me and I think you intended this.

Yes, the letter was also my fantasy for my real-life teacher. I wish she had received a letter like this which showed up what she really was.

Amir's letter is incensed. What is he so angry about? In today's Straits Times (23/12/13) c8, Vikram Seth is reported to have said that the "judgement that takes away the liberties of at least 50 million lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in India is scandalous, it's inhumane – and if you wish, you can remove the 'e' at the end of the word." Does Amir feel like this?

I came from a missionary school. The brain is able to intellectualise so much because of our education but unfortunately, you are not allowed to express yourself fully. In the 1980s, I remember being eloquent about depression and anger issues from a young age. Amongst friends, we could have adult discussions about "Who am I? Why am I putting up with this school and with society?" But there was something about the culture of school and the overall social system that prevented us from ultimately expressing our depression productively. It drove many to suicide. Some were sent to therapists and it helped to some extent. Amir's life implicitly reflects all this. His condition represents a kind of timeless anguish. And for someone like Amir to be articulating this intensifies his struggle.

So what we have here is a representation of a failure at a larger level – not just teachers, but parents, grandparents and broken families are equally responsible for what happens to children like Amir. Is that right?

This novel may be a way of recording a more widespread dysfunctionality, something that is perpetuated at home. Local literature is lacking individual stories that mirror this dysfunctionality. What does it mean to grow up as an individual in this society? That is why there is so much brokenness left unexpressed, extant everywhere.

Is that why you have stereotypical characters?

These are Mrs. De Souza's stereotypes. She does not want to see Amir's father as a real person. She has images that she wants everyone to fulfil. They cannot be anything else. And this has consequences, of course.

There are several observations about Singapore's educational system, social values and a lack of understanding about cultural heritage and diverse histories. What would you like to see changed in a decade's time? Is this possible through literary writing?

No. Literature alone cannot do it. Real change must be brought about at the level of Policy and Law. It is the lawmaker's responsibility at such higher levels. Literature is only one minor mode of change. It provides an alternate perspective. Unfortunately, the main purpose of literature still seems to be about entertainment.

Permission is necessary for literature to enable people to voice their different stories.

Awareness will lead to social growth, maturation and self-acceptance. But, at the same time, I am a little sceptical about the success of this. The worst thing, in any case, is to leave psychological issues unresolved.

Your novel has attempted to do this to some extent. What is the main message to the readers?

It is the teacher's and the lawmaker's responsibility to allow the child to express his feelings about growing up. What happens to a child at that particular age? It is a terribly vulnerable time, and if we provide youths with an environment to be free, to be expressive, without embarrassing them, without shaming them, they would grow up to be healthy, compassionate adults. Instead, if we force them to "belong, belong, belong," they all become repressed. There is a complete absence of options. Suicide becomes an easy escape and that is frightening. This is the moral essence here.

Thank you, Cyril.

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- Straw, Sticks, Brick*. Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2012.
- Satori Blues*. Singapore: Softblow Press, 2011.
- Oneiros*. Singapore: Firstfruits, 2010.
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