

Sharlene TEO

It's Just Emotion Taking Me Over: brief thoughts on feeling & fiction

Yesterday I looked up the etymology of the word emo: shorthand for “emotional hardcore,” born out of the hardcore punk scene in Washington in the 1980s. The word “hardcore” is punky and porn like. Yet when I think of emos, fey teens with greasy hair come to mind, scrawling pained lyrics on school desks or the underside of a wrist. To be emo is to emote life as one seemingly endless spell of relatable excruciation. *Emotional hardcore*: even the phrase itself presents the conflict between vulnerability and something grittier and altogether more abrasive.

When we say something or someone is “so emotional,” it is not necessarily positive. As writers we have to constantly negotiate between imbuing text with feeling without spilling over into sloppy cliché; word vomit; the overtly gushy, one-sided tirades that make up bad writing and selfish conversations.

What a tenuous balance it is between over-sharing and revealing just enough. Overshare and the reader gets exhausted and stops following; under share and risk being called stilted and stiff. We are not our characters, but writers must draw from emotional reality to animate our fictions. And it's a tricky task. Emotions can be messy, ugly, soppy, or cruel. Emotions can leak and seep through pages, screens, and surfaces.

I'm from Singapore and have always written about Singapore and Singaporeans. A 2012 Gallup poll revealed that Singapore was the world's least emotional country. Just 36% of respondents reported feeling either positive or negative emotions. The news sparked a series of Singapore-based tweets such as “Singapore ranked most emotionless country in the world—I don't know how I feel about that.” And it surely affirmed the Western perception of my country as a robotically efficient, spotlessly clean neoliberal metropolis.

I'm tired of the reductive narratives white men like to impose on non-white nations. Yet cultural generalisations creep into the conversations of even the most actively attentive to issues of social and racial justice. Cultural assumptions and practices affect how we express emotions. And this translates to how we depict them in fiction too. Singapore—a multiethnic, multiracial country— straddles the line between the individualistic speech and self-expression championed in Europe and America, and the collectivistic cultural context more common in East Asian countries, where self-disciplined reservation is encouraged. Patterns of emotions are social constructs, and even facial expressions in emotional communication tend to vary.

Seemingly affectless narrators can elicit tonal affect too, but only if the narration is bolstered by an undercurrent of emotion, of compassionate intent. In keeping with the writing truism: if you don't care about what you're writing, neither will the readers. It's not so much write what you know, as write what you feel to be true.

When we say that a piece of fiction is *moving*, that means it's effective. The story has managed, however briefly, to transport us from the banality and solipsism of our daily lives to some other recognisable or mysterious point. There is tremendous consolation in this. To be moved is to feel empathy. Empathy makes you less of a shitty person. To say “that moved me” draws attention to the motion in emotion, the sense of going if not somewhere then somehow, and the intimate *and* impersonal histories that are summoned, all at once, by good art and good fiction.

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Ghada Al-Absy (Egypt), Enza García Arreaza (Venezuela), Stuart Lao (Hong Kong), Xavier Villanova
(Mexico) and Sharlene Teo (Singapore)

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If we assume that good art is emotionally hardcore, what is softcore emotion? Does it reside in more critically derided forms (e.g. romance novels, erotica, fan/slash fiction sagas) than literary fiction? Is softcore emotion bounded by genre? I think we need to carefully reconsider how we judge serious and flippant emotions in alleged high and lowbrow fiction.

I read and write to move and be moved. What is the point otherwise? Writing that doesn't provoke, cajole, or evoke is failed fiction. The opposite of movement is inertia. I think the writer's role is to frame ideas in a dynamic way that feels not just true but emotionally distinct; to give the reader the sense of being in dialogue with another individual consciousness. Something more than just words on a page. Something moving; a flawed, living thing.