

PETER NAZARETH TALKS TO SUCHEN CHRISTINE LIM IN SINGAPORE

IN THE BACKDROP OF THE SINGAPORE WRITERS FESTIVAL, OCTOBER 2009

PN: This is Peter Nazareth. Suchen Christine Lim is one of the leading Singapore novelists and I am very glad to be interviewing her. We are sitting comfortably in her home—I on a chair and she on a bean bag. Suchen, I am so glad to be able to talk to you.

SL: Peter, I am very glad to welcome you and Mary to my home after three years. We first met in 1997 when I came to Iowa on the International Writing Program and returned subsequently in 2000 as International Writer in Residence, and it was your wife Mary who instigated me to apply for it.

PN: I had of course met you before we met physically because I received your second and third novels and I liked them very much and I wrote reviews for *World Literature Today*. I did not know anything about you at the time so it was a pure response to your writing and it's almost as though it led to your materializing in Iowa City. Books change life!

SL: I think so. I think books have changed my life. I did not plan to be a writer. Actually I wanted to sell chicken porridge as a kid. Then I wanted to be an astronaut and when I was a teenager, I wanted to be a revolutionary. When all those things failed, I decided I ought to teach. Writing never, never entered my mind. It just found me when I was invigilating an exam.

PN: You told that story recently to Professor Holden in a very good interview that is going to be published shortly. You talk about the hard struggle you went through when you actually began writing fiction. But between the lines of what you say, I realize that while you were working consciously on one level with your studies and later your job, there was something bubbling up inside you that just had to come through. You talk about this in many ways—sometimes, you just had to write, at other times there were characters who inhabited your mind and demanded release through your fiction.

SL: Yes. In that interview, with Professor Holden, I said that I didn't know what I was doing. The something I did not know morphed into a novel. I thought I was writing a children's story, then I thought I was writing a teenager's story. The writing went on and on and I just worked at it in the library after school until somebody else, a lecturer from Scotland, Nick, told me I actually had a novel on my hands.

PN: After you wrote a chapter?

SL: After I wrote the first draft. He happened to be my friend—Colin Nicolson, actually Professor at the University of Edinburgh now. He said I had a novel!

PN: That was *Rice Bowl*? Which has just been republished now, in a beautiful new edition, twenty-five years later?

SL: It had never been read publicly. I had never given a public reading of it because I was quite shy. Because readings were not so popular in Singapore then. Because no one invited me to read in 1984. It was only at Books Actually, just before the Singapore Writers' Festival, that I gave a public reading, to a full house. That was really wonderful. It was like a coming out party for *Rice Bowl*. In fact we celebrated it in Little India, with Diwali dinner. With wine, with beer, everything!

PN: What you have just said is rich with questions. It seems the novel had to find its own time. You wrote something that was of its time but it took its time for

people to catch up and discover how profound it was. **SL:** Well, in a way you are right. *Rice Bowl* was published in 1984 or 1986, I'm not quite sure because I don't have a first edition.

PN: You don't?

SL: I don't because in those days I was stupid about such things. Since then, it has gone through four reprints without a public reading. This new edition is new in that I have written a new Foreword to it. It's new in that I have changed a few things in it and corrected



Suchen Christine Lim (Photo by Russell Wong)

grammatical errors. In those days, in the early 1980s, we were still doing typesetting. I had worked on a manual typewriter. So certain things could not be changed and all the reprints carried the same errors and I was secretly embarrassed. That was also part of the reason why I did not want a public reading. (More importantly, no institution/group invited me to read *Rice Bowl*, and the novel was harshly reviewed in the *Straits Times*.) But this time around, the publisher changed the typescript into a Word document and sent me a soft copy...I could correct errors, and acknowledge some of the things I had used but had not adequately acknowledged. I'll give you an example. I used a hymn by Sister Miriam Therese Winters. In those days, in the Catholic Church here, you never knew who composed these hymns. The Church did not acknowledge them in those days. The songs were for free! So my group and I, we just used the guitar and sang these hymns. So I used a verse for *Rice Bowl*, for Sister Marie's character. But now twenty-five years later, with the Internet, I felt I could trace the composer. And I did! I wrote to her. I must tell you this story. She said Oh, she did not realize her hymn had this kind of impact in Singapore! She was very pleased. She said, Go ahead.

PN: Where is she?

SL: She is now in Connecticut. She is Professor of

Theology. She is a big name in Feminist theology.

PN: What's her name?

SL: As I said, she is Sister Miriam Therese Winter. But we made a mistake in her name in my novel: we put Sister Marie Therese. I wrote an apology to her. She wrote back and said, "Ah well, Suchen, don't lose any sleep over it. I know who I am, you know who I am, God knows who we are." I told my publisher about it, and they will correct the error in a reprint. It's a beautiful story of generosity from a nun in the US whom I've never met. The novel also had a quote from Mao Tse-Tung, taken from a poster and I had put it in the book. Later I found out it was actually from Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China*. In those days, Edgar Snow was a little known journalist. Now he is a big name. Those are some of the things I had to change.

PN: It's always good to give people credit because you lose nothing and they gain something.

SL: I have to do it. I am a history buff. I would read certain books and I stumbled later as an undergrad on Snow's book and it is one of the history books that made me cry. I was amazed that a historian's writing could affect me emotionally because he described the struggles of the Chinese people so well.

PN: What runs through your work is that you really want to make history come alive, and you make it come alive not by taking the big figures but by actually taking the small, overlooked, suppressed, invisible people in your fiction. It's not that you just do it but also that you are very conscious of doing it. Is that right?

SL: Hmm. Partly right. Conscious, and yet not conscious. Conscious in the sense that I dislike mainstream history's focus on successful towkays (tycoons) and businessmen and entrepreneurs and politicians. The immigrant success story is welcomed in any society, like the US, like Singapore. Everybody wants to write about that. And I always wonder what happened to those thousands and thousands of people who ended up as miners and paupers. Rickshaw pullers who killed themselves, who committed suicide, who drowned themselves in the Singapore River. What happened to all these people? Or the woman who was drowned in the pig basket, whom I wrote about in *A Bit of Earth*. This became the opening scene. It was taken from a footnote in my history book, which has been deleted. When I was a teenager, history books were more interesting, written by eccentric professors who reported the mainstream events as well as the personal events. I remember reading in my book on Malayan history a footnote that described how the affair between a Cantonese woman, the wife of the chief of the Cantonese clan Ghee Hin, with a tin miner from the rival Hakka clan called Hai San. Because of that affair, she was punished, but it also led to one of the great battles that gave the British a reason to come into Perak. In fact, Perak is the Malayan state that had the first British Resident and also the first state that rose in revolt against the British Resident. It's all inside *A Bit of Earth* but seen through Asian eyes.

PN: It seems like you consciously research history. But on the other hand, there seem to be characters popping into your head almost as though they have selected you.

Putting it another way, it seems that you put yourself

into a state in which you receive the characters. Can you talk about this?

SL: One example that's very clear for me. One afternoon, I was doing syllabus work for the Ministry of Education, just minding my own business, when this character, I don't know who he was, this fifteen year old boy—I just saw the back of his head—I knew he was fifteen from the height, entered my head. I could not see his face but from the back I could see that he was wearing a queue—the long plaited hair that the Chinese men in the nineteenth century wore unless they were prisoners...

PN: Was it a matter of style?

SL: It started in the seventeenth century when the Manchus conquered China. The Chinese were forced to wear a queue as a sign of submission to Manchu rule.

I am sure historians will disagree with my interpretation! Over the centuries, the Chinese accepted this style of wearing their hair—it was part of being a mandarin, a scholar. Criminals were forced to cut off their queues as a sign that they had done something wrong. It was a great shame to have their queues cut off. So when I saw this teenager with a queue, I knew this was not a modern story. I could not see his face. I did not know who he was, why he was in my head. So then I went to do some reading on Malay history and so on.

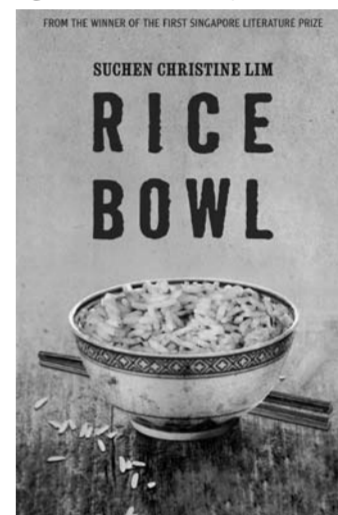
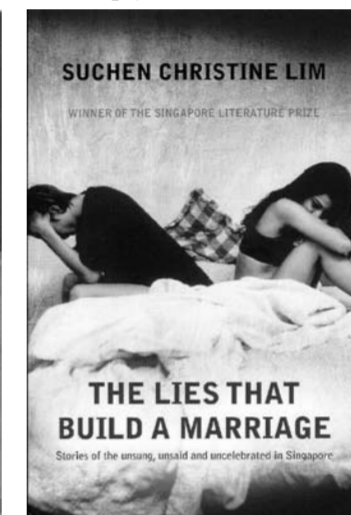
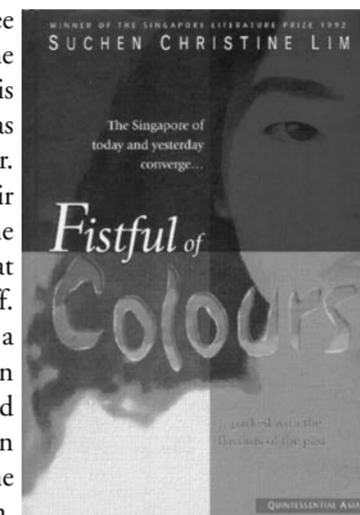
I knew it was not in China because I could see the scene of a river, I could see certain vegetables, trees, that were not part of China but of Malaya. Finally I was so fed up I gave him a name, Wong Tuck Heng. A Cantonese name and the name of my kung fu hero. The moment I named him, it was very strange, I could see his face. Then I knew his background, and it went on. That is how *A Bit of Earth* started.

The same thing happened to me with *Fistful*. I remember that afternoon clearly. I was at home, marking test papers; my son was under the table near my feet playing. And all of a sudden I had this very strong image of a woman painting wildly with her bare hands and I remember writing down a few pages describing the way she painted. And I read them out to Colin Nickelson again over the phone and he said the same thing you just did, "Wow!" I told him, "I don't know who the hell she is!" At the same time I felt that she was too strong for me. I had just written and published *Rice Bowl* and I knew I didn't have the craft, the skills, to handle this woman. That's why I forced myself to write *Gift From the Gods*. That novel is what I call my teaching novel, the novel that taught me how to write. I am a self taught novelist.

PN: So that's why there is a connection between the two novels, which I wrote about in my review in *World Literature Today*, Autumn 1993. I said in my review, that *Fistful* was "a complex reworking" of *Gift*. "Like Yenti in the previous work, Suwen is of Chinese origin," I said, "with no knowledge of her father and with a mother who, fleeing from class exploitation in China but now, having money, lays claim, like officials of the government, to the high culture of ancient China." I continued that Suwen wanted to get at the truth for which she was exploring "the idea of marrying two mediums—the word and the picture—to make

art." I saw that Suwen in *Fistful* is connected to Yenti in *Gift*. But I did not know that you did it deliberately! But also it seems that the Scotsman who liked your novels lived in your subconscious and emerged as Mark in *Fistful*.

SL: Not this Scotsman. I have always felt I have a Scottish connection. I feel very comfortable in Scotland. The Scottish connection started when I knew a Scotsman who was a teacher, a poet, and we were very close friends. He gave me John Pebble's book *The Highland Clearances*. That book moved me to tears because of the way the English were clearing out all those Scottish peasants. I did not know the Scots people, but I realized now I could feel for other nations' terrible history! The same thing happened to me in Korea recently. We were in the middle of an empty field and the Korean guide was



telling me about the largest Buddhist temple, destroyed by Hideyoshi, the Tokagawa of Japan, who conquered South Korea and destroyed this temple, a symbol of Korea's cultural greatness. And as he was talking, I was imagining the monks and the people who had built it. All that was left was a massive empty space and I really admired the Koreans for leaving it empty for hundreds of years. Emptiness as a national memorial. You just go there, stand in the middle of that space and you can feel the whole history and pain of the people whose temple had been destroyed by the Japanese. In that moment I understood Korean history and their strong feelings against the Japanese.

PN: Wow! I guess that is going to appear in your writing soon.

SL: I am not sure. Not in the next book I am working on. I am working on something.

PN: I want to go back to *Fistful*. That's the novel I have done the most about. I have written about it and taught it. I wrote about it in the new book edited by Gwee Li Su, *Sharing Borders, Vol. II*. That is such a complex novel that I felt in order to try to understand it, I had



Peter Nazareth delivers the keynote speech, "Teaching Singapore Literature at the University of Iowa" at the Singapore Festival of Literature, October 2009

to write about it in a new critical form altogether—in fact, to break standard critical form and to get to the art because the art is at the centre of the whole work. What I particularly liked about it is that while it is intensely about Chinese people, it is at the same time about Singapore and other people. I wonder if you can talk some more about how you were able to do that.

SL: I think I nearly killed myself imaginatively because, I suppose—actually, Peter, I don't know. Maybe it came from the years and years as a teenager when I walked and walked, I literally walked. It was my practice to stop several bus stops away from my school, Katong Convent, and along the way I would meet various people and talk to them, or they would talk to me. A Malay fisherman and I would speak in what we called pasar Malay. I would walk with my friends in Chinatown. It

was our hobby at that time to see if we could identify opium smokers—things like that. In those days, you had no television. What do you do as a teenager? I wasn't an Elvis fan like you—I used to go to Chinatown and join the clan association to sing Cantonese opera. So I suppose these were all influences. So when you grow up with different kinds of neighbors, Indian, Malay, Eurasian, you can't help but wonder what their lives are. My brother-in-law is Muslim. That story about the Christian father and the Muslim father in *Fistful* is based on what happened in my extended

family. I wanted to give credit and tell this story at a time when we perceive Muslim people as extremists, as terrorists, but there are Muslims who are gentle, who are just like us. In Singapore, the Malay Muslims are a minority and I also want to bring them into the fabric of Singapore because that's what it is. Malay is our national language.

PN: That's where we have a point of contact because my mother was born in Kuala Lumpur. I have Muslim relatives through marriage, I have Chinese relatives. I asked Mary a few years ago when she thinks of our grandsons, does she think of them as Goan or American and she replied, "I think of them as my grandsons." Family is a very profound way of responding to people. Perhaps through the writing, one can extend the notion of family hood to other people that one would not normally feel connected to.

SL: I've never thought of it that way. But I think that through the writer's imagination, an imagination that is inclusive, we can bring people into the fiction world for everybody to respond to, to relate and get to know. Growing up in a multicultural, multi-religious, multi-everything society i.e. Singapore, it's the writer's job to open doors, to include people who are marginalized in their fiction, and that's part of why I wrote *The Lies That Build a Marriage*, the short stories about gay men and lesbians who are marginalized, about transsexuals who have to live marginalized lives, but seen through the eyes of family members, a mother, an uncle, a daughter, instead of politicians, preachers and pastors. It is so easy to be part of mainstream society but so difficult to be at the margin. And so many people are secretly at the margin.

Peter Nazareth is Professor of English and Advisor, International Writing Programme, University of Iowa, USA.