

**Rosemarie Somaiah, *The Never Mind Girl and Other Stories*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012. 104 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-3388-9.**

This slim volume of 15 short stories concerning a schoolgirl's life in Singapore features an intriguingly inapposite cover illustration of caucasian girls dressed in old fashioned pinafore uniforms – though from the schools I've visited in Singapore, such uniforms could be plausibly contemporary. And thereby hangs a tale. From the cover, pretty, malicious faces loom like those of the more malicious steam engines originally illustrating the stories of Rev R.W. Awdry. But ultimately spiteful schoolgirls are not the main sources of misery in Rosemarie Somaiah's thoroughly readable book.

Though the first eponymous story reads as if it was aimed at younger female readers, the protagonist, Anna's predicament must seem recognisable to all of us. Anna experiences anxieties over her new school. As she tries to fit in, Josephine, ringleader of the social group who initially adopts Anna, attempts to censor just who Anna can interact with. Due to how they look, or behave, or where they come from, the majority of other schoolgirls (and potential friends) are "not one of us." Because Anna is genuinely unconcerned about others' appearance, social background, race, she is mocked as "the Never Mind Girl" (3). The presence of Singlish in the girls' encounters is one indicator that if this first short story is a fable, it is one that operates and resonates in a Singaporean context both within and without the school gates. After school, at home, Anna's parents explain that she, willing to accommodate all, can have lots of friends *if* she breaks free of the codes of Josephine's elite few. This "girl's own" story indeed already seems to be operating as a national tale, all too relevant in a state which, while presenting itself as "many races one nation," in too many cases witnesses students, staff, citizens continuing in milieux defined by class, culture, race.

Although framed as a collection of short stories, Somaiah's tales consistently focus on Anna and her family, thus forming a continued narrative, almost a novella. "Big Trouble!" centres on anxiety over body size – recalling Singapore's well-meaning but often insensitively interventionist initiative the Trim and Fit club of the nineties and "noughties." The club is presented here as inducing anxieties and even anorexia-like symptoms in students like Anna, who aren't even overweight. The story culminates in Anna outragedly defying a physics teacher, who as part of an "experiment" asks her students which of two girls in the class, a stout and a skinny student respectively, eats the most. The story highlights an institutional lack of sensitivity and pastoral unawareness now thankfully increasingly part of many local schools' pasts.

Somaiah also highlights the high quantity of local childhoods ("best days of our lives?") sacrificed to an ever-demanding, exam-oriented education

system, as traditional as the girls' uniforms. As Anna's mother Mrs Joseph observes of her daughter to Madam Mohideen in "Dream On," "I didn't actually sell her to the school, you know" (19). Her joking gestures to the impact of schoolwork not merely on children but also their families' lives. The Josephs have lived abroad and have many international friends. Through their relatively cosmopolitan eyes the rather parochial, often less than sensitive and relentlessly work and fact-oriented school system (where even extracurricular activities have become a joyless, compulsory activity), is found wanting.

When Liz, a fellow student's clothing is cut with scissors by a teacher on the orders of an exasperated Discipline Mistress, the Vice Principal explains: "The Discipline Mistress has a very hard time" (35). Mrs Joseph's reply is resonant,

... you cannot force everyone to obey every single rule. That is not possible in society! There will always be ones on the edge; on the fringes. They will always test your boundaries! That is normal. You cannot change that. You are trying to force all the students to look alike. But it's natural for teenagers to try to be different. It's part of growing up. You cannot completely control that! You cannot try to break their spirits or their hearts! (35)

In "the raid," as a prefect, Anna is also traumatised at being forced alongside police to search fellow students' bags for drugs, but mostly at having been potentially complicit in sending a classmate to prison. In "Down Under," a proposed "learning journey" to Australia reveals the discrepancies and financial inequalities affecting even school in a supposedly meritocratic society.

From a Singapore perspective, Mrs Joseph's suggestion that "education is for life" (41) is seen as naïve and unhelpful especially when Anna has to choose between Geography (which she doesn't enjoy but can succeed in due to her teacher's savvy in getting students to score well) and Literature as an exam subject. Here Somaiah touches on current, sensitive debates on the value of literature where local state and school policies have seen the subject die a very rapid death in Singapore since the early 1990s. In "The New Teacher" literature falls victim to unchallenged assumptions that the subject is too difficult, or more accurately devoid of the quick failsafe strategies for scoring well relied on in other subjects. Ludicrously, Anna in the same week she fails a literature test receives a class award for the subject. When Anna informs her Geography teacher that she's chosen literature, the teacher, incensed at Anna's potentially breaking her record of no one giving up the subject for literature resorts to emotional blackmail, "How can you do this to me?" (42). Another teacher informs Anna, "the school will be watching closely. Bad or erratic results will mean that the school rankings will drop and you should know that your results will contribute to that" (43). The school simultaneously infantilises and

pressures its students. Poignantly, the terminally ill Uma remains preoccupied with the results of the class test, on which students are told their futures hinge.

But a new literature teacher brings changes, tutoring students at her house for free to help students confront the burdens of Singapore's O Level exam for Literature in English. As Mrs Joseph reassures Liz elsewhere, when staff show human support in response to Anna's friend's self-abuse, "there are good people in your school, adults and teachers, who care for the children" (69). Ultimately, school-generated stresses take a severe psychological toll on Anna, highlighting the rarely discussed but very real issue of suicide among Singaporean schoolchildren. Teachers are represented as firm, confident, but ultimately unsympathetic – stressing "Time Management," and insisting that four and a half hours sleep is enough for the girls to survive on. Is this the amount of sleep their teachers get by on?

Increasingly, Somiah's narrative widens to include life outside of, but never wholly free of, school. Even the Josephs' loving and atypically arranged ground floor flat (no need to use the "dingy lift" [52]), cannot accommodate the paraphernalia of school. HDB life is evoked through lack of space, few story books, many assessment books, a loving but absent father working as hard as his daughters to support his family in increasingly costly Singapore. Deprived of play, a proper childhood, students instead frequent tutors' enrichment lessons. The not so uniformly pleasant sound of piano practices pervades the estate. Nevertheless, in an ageing estate, away from managerial eyes, the neighbourhood is more homely than most, almost recalling life before "Development":

Potted plants of all sizes, fruit trees and herbs, unauthorised barbeque sets, discarded bicycles, flapping laundry on assorted stands, garden furniture, tools and other decorative garden oddments encroached into the common areas and settled in comfortably. (52).

The vista of raintrees and iguanas keeps Mrs Joseph sane. The family cat is called Sher Khan. Thus so much as it remains in their power, the Josephs live a faintly transgressive Singaporean life. Mrs Joseph maintains a distaste for tuition, and doesn't keep zealous checks on her children's academic progress. Nevertheless, state demands and regulations mean the local, middle class family can't sit down together to meals. When Aunty Lila returns from New York she proves a rare and rich repository of information about Singapore's forgotten past – while also providing an alternative history of materially successful local men and their abused wives. Pam, the Josephs' Filipina maid foregrounds Singapore's domestic helpers and their hard but far from prosaic personal lives. Anna is in awe of pam's resilience "Aiyah; cry, cry for what?" (46). As Anna reflects "It was good to have Pam around" (49) as an imported reality check

amidst her confected, sterile, school-dominated life. Anna's attitude is juxtaposed with her classmate, spoilt tai tai in the making, Chantel's mother's indignantly accusing her despised maid Yani of stealing an orange (61) before sacking her.

While providing a telling exploration of the national through the pedagogical-domestic, Somaiah's book's strength also derives from its foregrounding and thereby privileging all kinds of Singapore women. While a great read (I had to finish it at one sitting), the book explores authentically personal and social issues relevant to all of us, the issues we should be having a conversation about. Thus Somaiah's book seems an ideal (because credible and well-written) resource for schools. It would also make for a valuable TV drama or local film, in a far more vital way than "Sing to the Dawn" ever could. In this review I have perhaps unfairly brought the controversial issues to the fore, but Somaiah's gentle, mediated and accessible exploration of these thorny, often sensitive issues offer a way forward in a conservative and often confused climate sorely in need of reflexivity and advice. Teachers and students together can learn from nuanced engagements with Somaiah's book. Thus *The Never Mind Girl* potentially offers genuine moral-social education, featuring empowering images of Singaporean young women as free thinking and questioning but also of an integrity and a sense of social justice hopefully tempering state-driven expedience.

**Angus Whitehead**  
**Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**