

**Clara Chow, *Dream Storeys*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016. 214 pp. ISBN 978-981-11-0907-2.**

Clara Chow's *Dream Storeys* begins with a drawing of a futuristic city: trees atop a steel mountain, underground dwellings teeming with human and natural life, a crowd of unusually structured buildings, a ferris wheel operating as a lift, its seats posing as tiny houses. This was what I saw in the drawing and I am sure other readers would glean other images but the drawing is a wonderful way to start a book that is intriguing in its design and intention, a book that brings together literary and architectural narratives. Chow got the idea for this book by chance, i.e. while talking to a friend who happens to be an architect. Chow decided that it would be interesting to ask architects, both established ones and those new in the industry, about their "dream buildings" (2) and to create stories around these buildings, populating them with fictional characters. She elaborates: "The result would be a hybrid creature: a document of what Singapore could be, as well as a map of the imaginary" (2). And certainly the book is different, novel and fun. To impose fantastical, imaginative spaces onto the space of Singapore, a modern, affluent, cosmopolitan city with a growing population, is to take the reader into other realms of existence. This is indeed an exciting venture that also, invariably, questions the way present day Singaporeans live and interact with each other and their environment. This dynamic dialogue between what is and what could be raises what I think are important issues which confront not only Singapore but also other countries in the throes of rapid development. How are people living amidst this kind of change? As the author states, she wanted to conjure "an alternative to the country as it is today" (2).

The structure of *Dream Storeys* is pivotal to the main impulse of the book which is to highlight the integral links between architectural and literary writings. There are eight chapters and each chapter starts with an interview with an architect which is followed by a short story, sometimes two stories. Chow poses several questions to the architects that touch on their vision of their dream buildings which could be a house, a retirement home, an orphanage, a mall, a car park. She asks them how the buildings they dream about could transform Singapore and Singaporeans. Chow probes deeper and also asks these architects who their favourite authors are and their thoughts on the possibility and importance of merging architecture and literary writing. I must say that these interviews made for riveting reading. It was interesting the way in which the personalities of these architects came through from their responses. They all talked about the need for Singaporeans to alter the way they respond to their built environment and the impact of architecture on human beings: "architecture teaches us the value of things. Over time, it can shape attitudes" (43). All of them also concurred with Chow as to the vital links between literature and architecture.

The short stories that accompany these interviews are equally entertaining. The first story in the collection, “The Mall,” is inspired by architect Yen Yen Wu’s idea that buildings should age like human beings. She says, “People assume that the appearance of timelessness is a good quality.... I’d like to debunk the theory that all things can and should be kept up” (7). Wu then talks about aging gracefully and celebrating the passing of time. “The Mall” showcases a dilapidated, “disposable” (11) shopping centre which is reaching the end of its days. Alongside this story, is the life story of Jill who works as a sales assistant in a bag boutique in this mall. Overwhelmed with life’s circumstances, Jill accepts the limited opportunities in her life and is eager to assist the building to reach its final end. However, Jill’s life also ends with the demise of the building. “Cave Man” evokes a time when people will live in well-planned underground cities. Alfred, the “cave man” in this story, is reasonably happy but he yearns to live above ground and applies for a house on the surface. However, when the opportunity comes, he is sorely disappointed. Perhaps he misses the people he left behind? Perhaps the vistas above the earth’s surface are not that appealing to him? There are no neat conclusions in *Dream Storeys*. Indeed this is something we expect from short stories: there is little room to make too many connections and conclusions. But herein lies the problem in the book: the interviews which precede the stories open up so many possibilities for cityscape living but the fictional tales do not always engage fully with this potential. While I find Chow’s depictions of buildings and sites very good – she certainly does justice to the architectural narrative – the people who live within these unique structures rarely interest or inspire the readers. And this is the pity. Because the core of architecture, as the interviewees repeatedly state, is humanity and allowing human beings to live meaningful lives, fully engaged with the human and natural other. But the people in *Dream Storeys* seem so disengaged from their surroundings: one-dimensional characters disgruntled with their lot. But then again I could be mistaken and what Chow is saying here could be that the Singaporean is so detached that he or she just cannot live in a more conscious way.

At another level, the collection questions Singaporean policies, rhetoric and the general lifestyle. Dr. Chang Jiat-Hwee who teaches at the Department of Architecture at the National University of Singapore says: “We have the Great Singapore Conversation that attempts to be very inclusive and listen to what people want, but we’ve not really seen that happen in architectural and urban design” (19). Designer and co-founder of Lekker Architects, Joshua Comaroff complains that with the high rents and the market becoming too inflated, designing buildings has become a process of “boring-fication” (137). Chapter Six entitled “Dream Storeys” gives us short accounts of three characters: a young man about to get married, a successful career woman and a man who gets divorced and remarries. What comes through in all these tales is how houses have become uniform, replicas of each other which in turn suggests lives that have

become regimented and monotonous. Though these three people occupy so-called dream homes/storeys, they live lives full of uncertainty, frustration and even apprehension. But there are other dream storeys or buildings which do carry possibilities for more meaningful human existence. “Tree House” is one such edifice. In this story we are offered an imaginative living space where the elderly and the young could live together: independently but also looking out for each other. Chow creates a gigantic tree that is like a utopia, full of fantastical nooks and crannies: “Individual rooms and sleeping pods radiated in all directions from a single banyan. This structure would be a network, a microcosm of society – each man, woman or child connected to another, while retaining an inviolable sense of self” (144). Though the utopia, like all utopias, ultimately has its flaws, Chow puts forward a provocative idea of how society could live differently, in ways that are more considerate and caring.

*Dream Storeys* is an interesting read. It realises the comment made by Dr. Nirmal Kishnani, Dean of Architecture, the National University of Singapore that “more important than architecture as an object is architecture as a set of relationships” (41). The book challenges us to re-think our relationships with people, nature, the buildings we occupy. And finally *Dream Storeys* is full of ideas and possibilities, told in a way that underlines the tragedy and humour that constitutes human existence.

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