

Colin Cheong, *The Colin Cheong Collection*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2011. 452 pp. ISBN 978-981-4346-38-2.

Before I received this book in the mail, I had never heard of Colin Cheong. Having read this collection of three short novels, a short story collection plus five bonus short stories, I am an enthusiastic fan. In his Preface, the author describes the first two novels, *Seventeen* and *Poets, Priests and Prostitutes* as “juvenilia,” “sort of like the embarrassing baby pictures your family shows to visitors.” I disagree. They are well-written, interesting and stick in my memory like they’ve been glued there.

The collection begins with *Seventeen*, a short novel first published in 1996. The language is poetic, the story told in frames, it is a novel of memories: A young man visits his old college and looks back at the boy he was when he attended classes; it is a school that has closed and is soon to be demolished. He gazes around the campus and remembers. “The wind breathes and pictures move. Photographs float like sepia leaves, scratching along the red-bricked ground, scattered like cards in a giant game of memory. Voices gather, movement blurs, shadows flit along the corridors – a homecoming to a deserted building” (10). What will a seventeen year old boy have to tell the man he will be years from now? “I could put between us a deck of pictures, my postcard moments, hot-pressed, heart-pressed, turning each one over, letting him read the past from those browning leaves. And I could hope old eyes would see what young eyes understood” (11). Isn’t that the reason we take and keep old photos? I seem to remember it that way.

The narrator’s best friend in college is a tall, lonely kid named ZZ (Zhuang Zi), chairman of the Photographic Society, the “bestest ever friend a guy could have” (15) and an ace in Chinese. For Richard, the narrator, Chinese is the one subject that will prevent him from moving on with his studies. Raised in an English-speaking family, Chinese is a foreign language to him, and he resists it. “Don’t be so negative, Richard,” his friend Jacqueline tells him. “The problem is you thinking it’s impossible” (22). Richard’s other problem is his family: his father is a failed businessman, his mother a failed housewife, his older brother a bully, his little sister Elizabeth is spoiled, and he doesn’t want to go home. It’s such a classic picture of teenage angst that I am drawn in to my own memories of long ago, which is very effective writing.

Seventeen is also a love story between Richard and Jacqueline, and how it so tragically ended in an act of sacrifice that saved his life. Every time I read the last few paragraphs of this fine novel, the tears come.

The second novel in this collection, *Poets, Priests and Prostitutes: A Rock Fairytale*, is a dark novel, but not a gloomy one. “With a kickstart and a restless

heart, Puck goes on an obsessive search for a girl he knows only from a poster. He finds her – and himself – in the embrace of a lifestyle a little too dark for the light of day, and must find a way to get them both out” (from the title page). It is dark because of the life Puck chooses when he finds Ariel, the girl in the poster, falls in love with her (and she with him), and has to extricate them both from the violent world of Singapore’s biker subculture in which she lives. I found the novel entrancing. Colin Cheong has a way of pulling readers into his stories and keeping them there.

A lonely outsider with his father’s classic Triumph motorcycle, Puck stumbles into that subculture and finds her. A former model and prostitute, Ariel is set to be married (not her choice) to a leader of one of the biker clubs. It becomes Puck’s obsession to save her, which he does by sending Ariel to an aunt and uncle in New Zealand. There she waits for him, pleading with him to come and join her, then finally accepting the reality that he won’t. Falling in love with a Chinese New Zealander named Peter, they are married. And then someone – a member of the old biker gang? – gives Peter a video of Ariel having sex with someone, and he walks out on her. Her last letter to Puck asks for his forgiveness.

In less talented hands, the story might very well have been a cliché; in Colin Cheong’s capable hands it is a novel I could not put down. One further thing – there are two endings to this story, but the second one isn’t in the novel; it’s in one of the stories in *Life Cycle of Homo Sapiens, Male*, and it fits perfectly. I was delighted when I discovered it.

In “The Man in the Cupboard,” Timothy Wong is not a happy man. In fact, he is so unhappy that he has decided to kill his overbearing, critical wife of 15 years. He says so right at the beginning: “I’m going to do her. Finally. I’m going to do it. Going to do her once she gets back from vacation” (207). What took him so long? Well, he says, she wasn’t always a bitch. But he, apparently, has always been a disappointment to her. So he decides to kill her.

How is he going to kill her? He’s going to sneak into their bedroom, put a pillow over her face and smother her. From here proceeds one of the saddest, most pathetically comical “perfect crimes” I’ve had the pleasure of reading about. It is clear from his obsessiveness about detail and orderliness why his wife finds him so annoying, and clear why his elaborate, goofy plan to kill her is not likely to work. In the end it doesn’t. One can only imagine the uproar that will ensue when she finds out who did the damage makes the reader wince with anticipation. A sad, comical, and very well-written short novel.

The eighteen stories in *Life Cycle of Homo Sapiens, Male* are, as the title suggests, stories about the struggles men have with living up to what they think maleness is all about, and the trouble men have with finding love. The blurb on the title page says it best: “The stories in this collection portray the stages in the life of a man, from first childhood love, through the vulnerability of adulthood,

to the twilight of existence. Above all, they explore man's need for woman, and the pain of this desire." Men anywhere will immediately relate to them, for we have all been there, or soon will be. Though often poignant, each of the stories is engaging. Two of them – "You'll Be a Man, My Son" and "Sweet Child of Mine" are personal favourites. In "You'll Be a Man, My Son," a young man must make a kill before he can become a man. His grandfather has decreed it. So he goes on a boar hunt and gets his kill. The next morning when only he and his grandfather are up, the old man asks him how he feels. "I do not feel anymore a man than before the kill," he says. "You should not," the old man says slowly and softly, as if to make sure that only his grandson heard him. The man looked questioningly at him. Then the old man smiled and spoke again. "You should not" (377), he said.

"Sweet Child of Mine" is tender, poignant, and brings tears to my eyes whenever I read it, as I have several times. It is also the "second" ending to *Poets, Priests and Prostitutes*. I'll leave it at that.

The five stories at the end of the book are also gems. I look forward to reading more of Colin Cheong's work as it is published and made available in the West.

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