

Catherine Lim, *Following the Wrong God Home* [2001]. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2011. 392 pp. ISBN 0-75284-121-1.

On the surface, *Following the Wrong God Home* is the love story of a beautiful, bright young Singaporean woman named Yin Ling Fong and a radical American professor named Ben Gallagher. Emotional tension is provided by Yin Ling's engagement to Vincent Chee, the ambitious scion of a wealthy Singaporean family who has his sights set on political position and power. Lonely and unhappy, Yin Ling is caught between her feelings for Ben, her desire to escape the social and financial position of her family, her sense of responsibility to care for her family's elderly retired servant Ah Heng Cheh, and her need of freedom to explore and expand who she is. She is described as lonely, depressed and unhappy. "On her wedding day... [she] felt an overwhelming sadness.... The sadness would not go away. It had come many times in her life, but not as stubbornly. It swirled inside her, a turgid stream seeking release" (9-10). In a poem she gives to Ben, she writes: "I want to tell you something/ Mine is a lonely message/ In a bottle, storm tossed,/ Cast by the sea at your feet./ I know/ You will go on your way./ You will not break the bottle,/ Much less break the code" (126). A challenge and a warning, Ben accepts, but not without some misgivings. "Passion. He could not do without it. The fervour he had brought to noble causes since boyhood was nothing in comparison to his passion for this woman" (255). "This beautiful, intense, difficult, unhappy woman had her own private grammar of misery. Ben thought, as he had thought many times, everything's working against me. I hate everything. It's a hopeless situation" (255). But he presses on, pulled by his curiosity.

One of the questions that repeatedly came to me as I read was: What does Ben see in Yin Ling? True, she is bright, beautiful, sensitive and can be outspoken when a guest at her fiancé's party is stupid (and drunk) enough to brag about having seen an underage prostitute, but she is also deeply melancholic. Is it the challenge she has issued him that he will never break the code of her life? Her ethereality or her enigmatic mystery? She is his "strange, ethereal little one" (359). It is a puzzle that I don't think the author ever solves. As for the Epitaph Woman – "died at thirty, buried at sixty" – will she, can she rewrite her story with a happier ending? These questions are never satisfactorily answered. The final sentence of the novel is puzzling: "He [Ben] would grow old, not burdened by the past but comforted and strengthened by it" (392). But what would comfort and strengthen him?

Ben Gallagher is a caricature of an "ugly American." Brash, irresponsible, obnoxious and opinionated, he reminds me of the character Professor James D. Levenson in Jorge Amado's great novel *Tent of Miracles*. Fond of beautiful young

women and, asked for or not, expressing his opinion, he strikes me as unhappy, immature, unstable and a poor match for Yin Ling, who would find life with him as unhappy as she finds her life with Vincent Chee.

Yin Ling's marriage to Vincent Chee is a classic movie scenario: a wealthy, socially prominent and politically connected young man meets a bright, beautiful young woman he sees as the ideal trophy wife. He sets out to win her, doing so by treating her with respect, lavishing gifts on her, and promising to provide care for her family's aged servant Ah Heng Cheh, for whom Yin Ling feels responsible. He introduces her to his mother (who does not approve) and shows her off to his friends, and explains to her what she will do and how he expects her to behave as his wife. Always his language is that of power and control. He makes one thing very clear: she is never to do anything that might humiliate him. If any marriage was set up to fail, it is this one, even without her melancholy, her desire for freedom and the fly in the ointment professor Ben Gallagher turns out to be. But first there is a son to bear. Vincent tells her early on that their firstborn will be a son; fortunately for the child and its mother, it is. Her second pregnancy ends in a miscarriage; Vincent assures her not to worry, as they will try again. His compassion is skin deep, and it is obvious: he is far more concerned about image than he is about her emotional needs. They must get on with playing their roles so that he can get where he wants to be in Singapore's power structure, and bearing children is part of that.

Underlying the stories of Yin Ling, Vincent Chee and Ben Gallagher is the story of Ah Heng Cheh, the elderly, demented Chinese woman who has been Yin Ling's family servant for four generations and who raised She and Yin Ling. Now retired and in her late eighties, with no living relatives, Yin Ling takes on the responsibility for Ah Heng Cheh's care and well-being. Vincent Chee, seeing this as no problem (or at least not an allowable one), chivalrously offers to provide for her, even – over his mother's strenuous objections – within his family home.

Ah Heng Cheh's prize possession is a small, ugly, battered statue of a Chinese god that she brought with her from China. Telling Yin Ling and her family that she will not die until she finds a proper home for him, she searches endlessly here and there, dragging Yin Ling and Ben with her. Is his proper home one of the rooms in the cavernous Sai Haw Villa? Though she drags Yin Ling and Ben there day after day, he gives no nod of satisfaction. Ultimately, after her death, Yin Ling takes the statue back to Ah Heng Cheh's home village, placing it in a shrine amongst its brothers.

Irascible, stubborn, cunning and occasionally gullible, Ah Heng Cheh once spent her life savings on a worthless piece of property somewhere on Singapore Island. Long a bone of contention within the family, it becomes the centre of a national emergency when it is discovered to be right in the middle of where an international petrochemical corporation wants to build a refinery. Ah

Heng Cheh suddenly has riches beyond her wildest dreams. The centre of everyone's attentions, she remembers the injustices and indignities visited upon her by Yin Ling's brother Kwan and Vincent Chee's mother. Able to turn the tables on people who have been her tormentors, she does, rewarding them with stacks of fake banknotes. Worse, her battered little god decides that her property will be his final resting place, and Ah Heng Cheh will not budge from the little shrine she has erected there. Everyone is stymied. "She was a nobody, an orphan all her life, who had had to submit to the whims of others, and now she could stand up and command wind and storm" (302), and she does. When someone sets fire to her little god's shrine, Vincent Chee and another man rush in and rescue her and her little god. Was he involved in setting the fire? It's a good guess, but the question is left hanging.

To me one of the most interesting stories within the novel is that of the young suicidal student, Justin, whom Yin Ling tutors. He is picked on, alienated, angry and gay. It is Yin Ling's intelligence, calm and compassion that eventually break through, creating a bond. Sadly, his life ends in suicide when his drug-addicted lover leaves him and returns to England.

Overall, I am left ambivalent about the novel. There is plenty of emotional tension here. For a Westerner like myself, it provides me with a glimpse of Singaporean life and culture in the 1980s. The love affair between Yin Ling and Ben Gallagher is too dreamlike, too unreal.

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