

***Dark Tales*. Singapore: National Library Board, 2013. 89 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-5111-1.**

Dark Tales, a collection of five original stories, is the result of a “Spin Your Supernatural Yarn” workshop organised by the Singapore National Library Board in September 2012. Focusing on the theme of horror, this one-month long writing workshop which aimed at promoting the arts, provided aspiring local writers a platform to share their chilling and hair-raising stories with fellow Singaporeans. This pool of young writers were closely mentored by Verena Tay, a seasoned local writer and storyteller.

This compilation of macabre tales is indeed timely as the horror and supernatural genre have been rising in popularity in recent decades especially among the younger generation. Some of these stories in the written medium have infiltrated the world of cinema and TV and have chalked up record-breaking numbers at the box office. These would include Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, Oren Peli’s *Paranormal Activity* and Takashi Shimizu’s *Ju-on The Grudge* – the latter, a Japanese horror movie which has spawned several sequels and a heart-pounding American remake, titled *The Grudge*.

Some believe that the horror genre has a massive appeal as it produces a cathartic effect, purging audiences of their negative emotions of fear, worry and anxiety. Others opine that the stories, especially the slasher movies tend to reinforce strict moral codes as those who get killed in these stories are young, carefree college-going students who indulge in premarital sex, drugs, alcohol etc. Essentially, in these movies – namely, the *Scream* series, *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* – the young students die as a result of their misbehaviour or misdeeds.

This strikes a similar chord with some of the stories in this slim volume. For instance, in Carena Chor’s “And Hair She Is,” the main protagonist, an unnamed character, referred to as the “kid” by her male Canadian friend, Chris, was strangled by her own hair, a collection of daily hair fall, as she had transgressed traditional values and cultural practices after imbibing modern, Western values and lifestyle by drinking alcohol and by mixing freely with the opposite sex. Initially, the protagonist, a Chinese Singaporean, who was pursuing her studies in a Canadian college, had problems adjusting to her new environment, “the food, the too quiet environment and the uninhibited behaviour of her college mates” (*Dark Tales* 12) as they smoked, drank and “smooched” in public. However, as time progressed, she learned to adapt to her new environment by embracing new cultural habits such as watching television, American sitcoms in particular, drinking beer etc.

Obsessed with her long shiny hair, the protagonist collected strands of hair that were entangled in her hairbrush, removed them and kept them in place

using a masking tape, and stuck it on the back of her room door, at the level of her forehead. Over time, the collection of hair grew as more fallen hair were added to it. The fallen hair were spooky as they talked, whined and chided the main protagonist for not adhering to her traditional norms and values. Vexed with her changed behaviour and her unwillingness to return to her roots, the bunched up hair detached themselves from the door, moved towards her and strangled her by wounding themselves around her neck.

The stories in this volume do not just explore the realm of the supernatural as they also examine important issues that affect people and society. In this regard, Carena Chor's "And Hair She Is" investigates the complex theme of identity through the protagonist's obsession with collecting her own fallen hair. Feeling guilty for adapting to a modern way of life, the accumulated fallen hair come to symbolise the protagonist's unwillingness to relinquish old traditions and values, giving rise to tensions and contradictory feelings in her.

The second story, Lynn Dresel's excerpt taken from her forthcoming novel "The Republic Chronicles," explores the theme of greed for wealth. Ah Tuck, a thief, who was facing financial problems decided to follow his friend Jamil to visit a *tangka* or spirit-medium to ask him for lucky numbers that would enable him to win big to solve his financial woes. He was indeed unlucky as he was tricked by the spirit-medium into becoming a sacrificial lamb for an evil spirit inhabiting the body of a cat staying in the house which Ah Tuck planned to rob. The setting of the story is characteristically gothic as words and phrases such as "tombstone," "grave," "cemetery," "old and decrepit," "long tendrils of root hanging down to the ground," etc. evoke images of horror, death and decay. One feels a deep sense of foreboding emanating from such a gothic-like setting.

Karen Lim Shor-Wei's "Snakes," the third story in the volume, explores the issue of human exploitation and its devastating effects on a particular community. In this story, the island which was once ruled by spiritual forces was taken over by a Consortium of landowners after a long season of famine. The latter exploited the villagers as they had to work hard but were not given sufficient food. Although the islanders were expected to be evacuated as the volcano in the centre of the island was smouldering and about to erupt, the Consortium landowners forced everyone to continue to work and cultivate the land. Old religious rites and traditions that were carried out to appease the wrath of the gods or spiritual forces were no longer adhered to. Tesa's grandmother was the one who carried out the rites, but she was imprisoned by the Consortium when she approached them for an offering for the gods since they were the "new visitors to the island" (*Dark Tales* 52).

Tesa was chosen to replace the grandmother and she was expected to carry out the final ritual but she was not able to do so as she could not receive

guidance from her grandmother who was imprisoned. Before the volcano erupted, Tesa had a strange dream of snakes which were slithering and swarming all over her naked body. Dreams are typical of gothic conventions as they help to express and reveal terrible truths about the human condition. In this context, Tesa's dreams of snakes portend the disaster and devastation that awaited the islanders as the spiritual forces were taking revenge against the Consortium landowners for exploiting the islanders and also for forsaking important rituals and traditions of their forefathers. The volcano erupted and they were killed by the molten lava as well as the snakes which devoured them as they tried to flee the island.

The fourth story, Alex Mitchell's "The Pillowcase" explores the theme of compassion and self-awareness through an old pillowcase and the ghostly presence of a little boy. The pillowcase and the boy compelled Eric to confront his painful memories of the past which he had tried to repress and block out. When Eric was a little boy, he had chanced upon his grandmother suffocating his ailing grandfather with a pillow that had a pillowcase stitched with exquisite needlework flowers. Moved by her sick husband's pleas to end his life, she performed an act of mercy killing on him. In an ironic twist, it was now Eric's turn to do the same for his ailing grandmother when he visited her in hospital. Fate repeated itself as the one who watched the mercy killing this time round was his own young son.

Written by Renee Hi Xiu King, the final story in the volume titled "I'll be Different" explores the theme of reincarnation through the main character, Ze Hong. In this story, Ze Hong, who is comatose after meeting with an accident, has an out-of-body experience and finds himself clearing his grandparents' graves for *Qing Ming Jie* (tomb sweeping day). This is where he meets Xiong Cai, a waif-like boy, whom he later finds out had died at a young age from meningitis. Ze Hong recovers from his comatose state and later learns that Xiong Cai has reincarnated as his newborn nephew. While in labour, Ze Hong's sister-in-law thought the baby had died as she could no longer feel her baby move. Miraculously, the baby was alive when it was born. The reincarnation was an act of gratitude on Xiong Cai's part as it was Ze Hong who had saved him from bullies in school when Xiong Cai was still alive.

Ghost stories and the horror genre are hugely popular in Singapore, judging from Russell Lee's *True Singapore Ghost Stories* which have become bestsellers. As such, the stories in this volume, which have incorporated integral elements of the horror genre, will, in all likelihood, appeal to dedicated horror fans or horror aficionados out there in Singapore and elsewhere.

Shakila Abdul Manan
Universiti Sains Malaysia