

Chuah Guat Eng, *Dream Stuff*. Kuala Lumpur: Holograms, 2014. 153 pp. ISBN 978-983-43778-2-3.

In her first short story in *Dream Stuff*, “The Stuff of Dreams,” Chuah Guat Eng draws her reader into a seemingly light banter during a family mealtime conversation, but this story takes an abrupt turn, leaving the reader scanning earlier pages, wondering what has just happened.

Yes, Chuah writes about the stuff of dreams at times; her stories wander strangely but fluidly from one thread to another. Some tales fit the detective genre; others transport the reader to the interstellar realms of the Araneans and the Tarronians. At times, Chuah wilfully blurs the line between parallel narrative threads or meanings, and so the reader is left re-forming the story in his/her mind, trying to parse fact from reverie.

For example, in “Tell Me Something about Your Life,” the reader fumbles over the narrative, wondering at which point the story becomes a daydream. Did the narrator imagine the suddenly gruesome events she recounts? Or did they really happen? The reader becomes hauntingly metaconscious of these dreaming states of mind. These shifts in plot and reflection have Atwoodian echoes a la *Alias Grace*. As the reader moves through *Dream Stuff*, he/she learns not to be deceived by seemingly lighthearted openings; a little noir might wait in the wings.

Despite her twists in narrative, Chuah’s prose is calculated and polished. Critic Andrew Ng writes in reference to Chuah’s *Days of Change: A Malaysian Novel*, “One of the more successful aspects of the narrative is the author’s dexterity in handling several yarns, as if knitting an intricate, multicoloured sweater (197). To Ng’s comment, I will add that Chuah’s dexterity seems effortless in *Dream Stuff*, the fabric and colours change before one’s eyes, often revealing a social commentary as the reader considers a different-than-expected outcome.

Chuah’s last story in *Dream Stuff*, like others in this narrative, reveals the vestiges of colonialism, as if to suggest its fossilising nature. It’s as if her characters are preserved in amber; they cannot emerge in a world beyond colonialism. Characters such as Xue Li in “Her Own Mistress” become ensconced in their tar-hardened version of reality. On the one hand, Chuah suggests that the “instinct for self-preservation” has declined – not just for her character, Xue Li, but also for all children protected by wealth created during the colonial era (133), but, on the other hand, such characters seem to be wary of the need for “duplicity” as a means of survival (133). For example, Chuah writes, “If the world was incomprehensible, then it was because she [Xue Li] somehow lacked the intelligence to comprehend it” (133). However, Chuah adds that Xue Li’s inheritance (of great wealth) “was part of her, her history, her

identity” and proceeds to move forward without regret at the patterns of life shaped by colonialism (133).

Wealth and postcolonialism aside, *Dream Stuff* addresses other sociopolitical and personal conflicts that occur within the Southeast Asian middle class. For example, “Gardens” deals with religion and motherhood and adolescent/estranged sons. Chuah neglects to name influencing religions in conflict within a family (e.g. Christianity/Buddhism/Islam) – but the characters shoulder on, not questioning the origins or processes by which these disparate religions coexist.¹

Many of Chuah’s writings deal with the interactions of people who supposedly have close or long-term relationships, such as siblings, cousins and even a doctor and receptionist. Chuah extends this discussion in “Memoirs of an Aranean Harpist.” In this extended story, the narrator speaks – methodically like T’Pol in *Star Trek* – on a variety of interstellar politics. (Part of the text includes a voicelog from a captain.) Chuah references the “seven imperial houses of Tarron, all of which claimed to be descended from a common ancestor” (20). One cannot help but think of the seven sisters of Eve or even the states and federations of Malaysia, of which there are 13 today. The narrator also references the expunging of the most common names on the planet of Tarron, Hisimmu and Ulanuzzi, thanks to two warring cousins, descendants of twins of the same name. Chuah – or the narrator – mocks these jejune political endeavours, which lead to the eventual demise of the peaceful, harp-playing, water-producing Araneans (20). Although this story is the only bona-fide science fiction read that contrasts starkly with the other genres in *Dream Stuff*, readers – especially science fiction lovers and critics of petty politics – may enjoy this at-odds piece.

Chuah has published two other works. Ng explains, *Days of Change*, Chuah’s “second novel, is purportedly a sequel to her first, *Echoes of Silence...*” (196). A three-quel is in the works, *Whispers of Truth*.² *Dream Stuff*, contrarily, consists of short stories and is her first published collection in this genre, although several of her 12 stories, including the very brief “Of Snakes and Flower Cars,” have already appeared in *The New Straits Times*.

Chuah’s guarded prose and variety of subgenres within the short story genre may leave readers desiring accompanying glosses that clarify opaque references to commentary on religion and politics; politics aside, however, readers can still enjoy these chain-linked stories for their noir-tendencies, not to mention universal discussions of mother-son and other close family relationships.

¹ “Forbidden Fruits” also touches on religion.

² For information on the third instalment, see Catalina Rembuyan, “*Dream Stuff*: Slim but Strong.”

Works Cited

- Ng, Andrew. Rev. of Chuah Guat Eng's *Days of Change: A Malaysian Novel*. *Asiatic* 4.2 (2010): 196-98. <http://asiatic.iium.edu.my/article/Asiatic%204.2%20pdf%20files/Andrew.%20review%202.pdf>. Web. 15 Apr. 2015.
- Rembuyan, Catalina. "Dream Stuff: Slim but Strong." *The Star Online*. 20 Jan. 2015. 7 Apr. 2015. <http://www.thestar.com.my/Lifestyle/Books/Reviews/2015/01/20/Dream-Stuff/>. 1 May 2015.

Pauline T. Newton
Southern Methodist University, Texas, USA