

Complete Citation: Wicks, Peter (2007). Claire Tham (1967-). *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 1 September 2007. ISSN 1747-678X.

Accessed from USQ ePrints <http://eprints.usq.edu.au>

CLAIRE THAM (1967-)

Peter Wicks, University of Southern Queensland

Novelist, lawyer

Active 1984- in Singapore, Southeast Asia

In a post-colonial, English-medium country like Singapore, the consolidation of a literary tradition and establishment of a distinctive genre depends on the emergence of new, younger voices. Fortunately, there are many voices now being heard in Singapore, including the lawyer, Claire Tham.

Born in 1967, Tham was educated at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus and at Hwa Chong Junior College, both in Singapore, and then at Oxford University in Britain, where she read Law. Now employed as legal officer in a bank, she began writing fiction at a very early age, and once hoped to write "the ultimate rock and roll story". Literary recognition, too, came early. At the tender age of seventeen, Tham won two second prizes in the National Short Story Writing Competition of 1984, followed by the Commendation Award for Fiction from the National Book Development Council of Singapore in 1992, and the Highly Commended Award for Fiction in 1995. In 1999 and again in 2001, Tham won a Golden Point Award for the SPH-NAC Short Story Writing Competition, organised by Singapore Press Holdings and the National Arts Council. She has prepared literary reviews for *The Straits Times* newspaper, and her first novel, *Skimming*, published by Times Editions, appeared in 1999. In the continuing debate about Singaporean identity, Claire Tham's prose conveys a very dim view of official exhortations to revere authority, uphold the community above

the individual, practise family values, prosper, and conform. Instead, bored, restless, cosmopolitan youngsters populate the pages of *Fascist Rock: Stories of Rebellion* (1990), Tham's first published collection of short stories. Brilliant, opinionated, and irreverent, Tham demonstrated a capacity to capture the mood and manners of twenty-year-old Singaporeans with given names like Patsy, Chris, Alphonsus, James, Jeanne, and Irwin, who typically inhabit cars, arcades, and condominiums, and who convey sentiments about as deep as a half-smoked cigarette, a pop song, or an evening drive past ghostly grey blocks of flats. The title *Fascist Rock* is about the only ambiguity in this book. It could refer to a place, to music, or to an attitude, or all three. For the characters in the story, "Baby, You Can Drive My Car", life is brittle, hedonist, narcissistic, escapist, 'a fake magazine existence.' The past is dead, and a friend's death brings merely a futile shrug of the shoulder. Tham's terse, spare prose surges up out of each story as her characters express their frustration at life on an island "no longer than a peanut", at official recollections of thousands of years of Chinese history which do not translate to Singapore, and at conformist practices like university initiations. Even a classic Chinese immigrant success story can go sour when in the story, "Homecoming", a Singaporean university student returns from London to confront the solitary loneliness of a recently-deceased father, who "did nothing but stay in his flat all day, re-reading the papers and waiting for the moment his son would come home. Behind every educational achievement, Tham indicates, there is an enormous private cost. The contrast of generational opportunity in this story is profound.

Older Singaporeans are allowed some, albeit brief, say in Tham's literary vision. In the story just called "Lee", it is left to a Chinese Singaporean father to explain to his

Americanised, street-smart daughter that any former colony full of comparatively recent immigrants has to try doubly hard to matter and to be respected in a competitive world. However, at least by comparison, a measure of acquiescence is possible, even for restless youth caught in a "milieu of work and pragmatism." The story called "Pawns" is set in June, 1989. The events of that time in China sent shockwaves throughout the rest of Asia, and indeed the world. "Pawns" vividly shows that the Lion City is more than preferable to a Celestial Middle Kingdom that can silence the cream of its educated younger generation at Tiananmen Square.

Tham's second published collection, *Saving the Rainforest and other stories* (1993), continues a literary exploration of particular kinds of non-conformity amongst an outwardly successful, materially preoccupied, formerly immigrant community. The undoubted pick of the collection, "The Forerunner", shows that Tham has a remarkable capacity clearly to delineate deterioration in human relationships, as between wife and husband, parent and child, or one generation and another. There are no prim Confucian success stories here, no manuals on successful leadership, and no slogans for social improvement. Thus, an older Chinese woman forms an intense, futile romantic relationship with a younger, illegitimate Eurasian male, thereby providing the actual, subtle, unexpected theme of the title-story "Saving the Rainforest". "Sundrift" traces the short-lived marriage between a starry-eyed young Singaporean Indian woman and an American expatriate whom she never really gets to know. A fleeting physical liaison between two men of very different ages occurs in "Deep Sea Sloth", resulting in the end of the older one's career. The suicide of a naked, drug-ridden teenager in "Forerunner" effectively conveys the terminal state of his parents' marriage.

Taken together, the seven stark stories in this volume offer sombre insights into the Singaporean story, out of the mainstream, into the shadows, along the margins, or just below the surface. Claire Tham's characters are truly national patriarchy Lee Kuan Yew's social nightmare. Yet an inclusive and mutually satisfying definition of Singapore surely has to embrace the multiplicity of its people's experience, including that of its younger members.

Tham's first novel, *Skimming* (1999), is a significant technical achievement. The motif of a lovers' triangle is, of course, not new. But, by consciously adopting three vantage points, those of the young woman and the two men who love her over time, Tham manages to convey the depth and complexity of the complex, triangular relationship in a fresh, vivid and intelligent way. Tham's characteristic prose style is evident from the outset, including her clear, crisp choice of words, short, economical sentences, and pointed dialogue. This distinctive style sustains her in her employment of the longer, capacious literary form of the novel.

The plot begins in the bleak, spare residential colleges of Oxford where three of Singapore's young achievers named Li, Wai Keong, and David are reading for their degrees. Their academic successes mask some profound personal and social differences. Li and Wai Keong, the initial lovers, come from a similar, conventionally upper middle class background of wealth and private apartments. The seemingly unconventional David, who gradually wins Li's affections away from Wai Leong, is from rougher stock - working class, public flat, large family. Although she is reluctant to acknowledge the truth, it is this significant social difference that attracts Li at first, especially in the unconstrained environment of an

English university. Later, when married and returned to Singapore, the social difference comes to matter much more, and helps drive Li and David apart. What at first attracts soon begins to repel, though the brittle fickleness of Li's persona means not for long. Again, Tham is informed and sophisticated in her capacity to delineate the disintegration of a personal relationship. Unusual for a Singaporean author, it is not place, landscape or scenery that primarily matters to Claire Tham, but characterisation.

As an author, Claire Tham has this far been less concerned to observe the canons of English literature and more concerned to explore its creative possibilities and its adaptability. She also articulates a significant viewpoint about national and personal identity, about cultural tensions in a dynamic urban centre in transition, and about the flip-side of Singapore's prodigious prosperity.

WORKS BY CLAIRE THAM

Fascist Rock: Stories of Rebellion. Singapore: Times Books International, 1990.

Saving the Rainforest and other Stories. Singapore: Times Books International, 1993.

Skimming. Singapore: Times Books International, 1999.