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DAREN SHIAU (1971-)

Peter Wicks, University of Southern Queensland

Novelist, lawyer, environmentalist
Active 1999- in Singapore, Southeast Asia

The prodigious achievement of the Housing and Development Board in Singapore since independence furnishes the physical environment for Daren Shiau's literary endeavours. Shiau's novel, *Heartland*, was published by SNP Editions Ltd under their Raffles Imprint in 1999, and won a Commendation Award in the Singapore Literature Prizes the same year. *Heartland* was also voted one of the best reads of the year by *The Straits Times* newspaper. It was re-published by Ethos Books in 2002. The novel is a prescribed text for O-Level Literature in English in Singapore's secondary schools for 2008.

In one respect, *Heartland* is a standard account of the coming of age of a teenage Chinese Singaporean male, Wing Chen, an innocent, amiable fellow who stumbles on to a path of experience. "What did he want to do?" Wing ponders at the tender age of eighteen. "He never really thought about the future..." Throughout the narrative, Wing falls in and out of love, he loses old friends and makes new ones, he studies at

Junior College and then enters the earthy, vindictive realm of National Service, he cares for his aging mother and witnesses personal tragedy for the first time when a friend perishes in a traffic accident. Whilst enough to keep the narrative engaging, none of these elements in the plot make Daren Shiau's fiction especially distinctive.

It is the author's reverence for the Singaporean landscape that permeates the text. Shiau's novel is replete with dense, accurate descriptions of Singaporean scenes, from the Confucian antiques of Haw Par Villa to Zouk discotheque to the chronic torrential flooding along Bukit Timah Road. Undoubtedly, the plethora of local references conveys the author's "true blue Singaporean heart." In particular, Shiau grants the heartland of HDB flats a status that verges on the mythological. The real characters of *Heartland* are not personalities like Wing Chen, Sham, Audrey, Eugene, May Lin, and Yong, interesting in their range that they are, but rather the ubiquitous housing estates that accommodate the vast majority of ordinary Singaporeans. The blocks of public flats inhabit Shiau's prose as a living, and generally benign force. One evening, Wing looks up at the estate in Ghim Mo where he has stayed for most of his life:

"The blocks were like resting giants, their faces sullen and dark with repose. The estate was deep

in sleep."

Later Wing directly links the housing estate to Singaporean achievement.

"Silent as a painting, the estate spoke in its own voice ...it was the common man who lived in homes in the sky." (7)

Singapore may not quite yet be a proletarian utopia, but it comes close. As another character in *Heartland* assures Wing Chen that, "although things are expensive here, the big issues are taken care of." Shiau's passion for place is offered as a counterpoint to the author's underlying perception of Singapore as historically recent, nationally arbitrary and strategically vulnerable.

Such a literary celebration of Singapore accurately reflects the life-experience of its author. For more than two decades, Daren Shiau's family lived in the same five-room flat in a public housing estate facing Holland Village on Holland Drive. Born in 1971, Shiau exhibited an interest in literature and creative writing very early. His primary schooling was at Raffles Institution. When he attended secondary school at Raffles Junior College as a Public Service Commission Humanities Scholar, he won the yearly writing prize. During

his tertiary education at the National University of Singapore, he won prizes in prose and verse in the NUS Literary Society Competition in 1993/94, prior to graduating with Honours in Law. He was named on the Dean's List, and received the NUSSU Gold Award. He won a Fulbright Scholarship to the East-West Centre in Hawaii, and now works as a corporate lawyer. In 2000, Shiau won the Tangerine Award for short fiction, and also published the collection of poems entitled *Peninsular*. In Fall, 2003, Shiau was Visiting Writer at the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies in the University of California, Berkeley, and during the following year, he was a guest reader at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

An active conservationist, Shiau founded the 'Water for Somalia' project with NUS Students in the Against the Violation of Earth (SAVE) group. The project earned him the first Singapore Green Leaf Award from the Ministry of Environment in 1993. Shiau has subsequently chaired the Youth Environmental Network of Singapore (YEN), he is a director of the Singapore Environment Council (SEC) and he participated in the committee to review the Singapore Green Plan. His handbook, *Communication and the Environment*, was issued in 2000. Shiau was awarded the Singapore Youth Award for Community Service in 2000, and was officially recognised as the Outstanding Young Person of Singapore that same year. In

2003, the *Straits Times* identified him as one of "38 Singaporeans Who make a Difference to Singapore."

Shiau's environmental activism is echoed in *Heartland*, not only when he has the protagonist, Wing Chen, publicly oppose the vivisection of a dog at college, but in his intensely aesthetic approach to his Singaporean surroundings, and his valorisation of the Singaporean landscape.

WORKS BY DAREN SHIAU

Heartland. Singapore: Raffles editions, 1999; republished Ethos Books, 2002.

Peninsular: Archipelagos and Other Islands. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2000.

Communication and the Environment. Singapore: SEC, 2000.