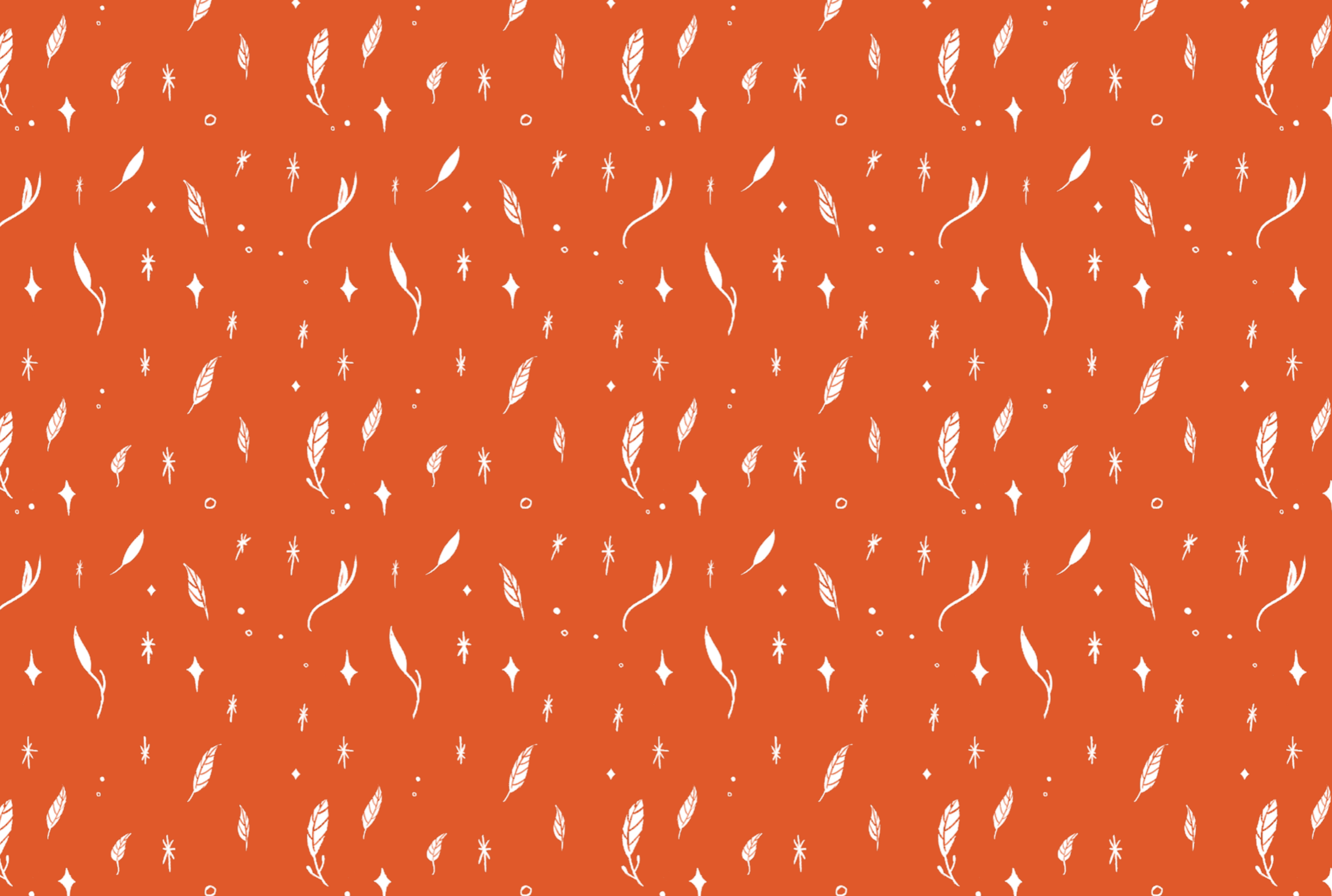


AWESOME  
WOMEN OF  
SINGAPORE

EDITED BY MARGARET THOMAS





“The stories in this book are about women and the choices they make. It is this very ability to make choices that gives children the confidence they need as they grow into adults.”

—Rahayu Mohamad, early education specialist

**What children say about the Awesome Women:**

“This is extremely encouraging as it is often assumed that most great accomplishments were done by men.”

—Faith, 13

“We need to learn about how these women made sacrifices to pursue their dreams, becoming role models to all Singaporeans.”

—Sai, 14

“The achievements of these inspirational women should be shared in schools so more people can be inspired to do the same and achieve greater glory for Singapore.”

—Divakas, 14

“This will encourage everyone to treat others equally, regardless of gender.”

—Chester, 16

AWESOME  
WOMEN OF  
SINGAPORE

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[www.epigram.sg](http://www.epigram.sg)

National Library Board, Singapore  
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Thomas, Margaret, 1951- editor.  
Title: Awesome women of Singapore / edited by Margaret Thomas.  
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2021.  
Identifiers: OCN 1232228169 | ISBN 978-981-49-0199-4 (hardcover) |  
ISBN 978-981-49-0124-6 (paperback) | ISBN 978-981-49-0125-3 (ebook)  
Subjects: LCSH: Women—Singapore—Juvenile literature.  
Classification: DDC 305.4095957—dc23

First edition, March 2021.

# AWESOME WOMEN SINGAPORE

EDITED BY MARGARET THOMAS

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EPIGRAM



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## EDITOR'S NOTE

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“I am a girl and I feel happy to know that women also made great discoveries and had great ideas! Now I can tell my brother that men didn’t do all the cool stuff!”

This was what eleven-year-old Molly said when she visited an exhibition based on the Singapore Women’s Hall of Fame. And that’s exactly why we launched the Hall of Fame back in 2014—we knew it wasn’t just men who had done all the cool stuff.

Women have been there alongside men as Singapore developed and prospered over the last 200 years, but there is little about the contributions and achievements of our women in the history books. Many of their stories have not been documented. A key aim of the Hall of Fame is to make sure the stories of the awesome women of Singapore are recorded for posterity, so that they can be shared again and again.

We are especially keen to get these stories of courage and compassion, determination and discipline, and passion and persistence to our children. These are stories that can inspire our young to reach beyond themselves, to dare to dream and to want to make those dreams come true.

Singapore is now working to establish gender equality as a fundamental value. This calls for our children to be taught that women and men are equals, that gender does not determine your role in life and it is not a barrier to your achieving your full potential.

The stories of the awesome women of Singapore will help to make this point. Like Molly, our children—both boys and girls—will realise that women have made great discoveries and had great ideas, and that they have done a lot of cool stuff and are doing even cooler stuff today.

### The Advice of Children

You will notice that while all of the 160 women inducted to the Hall of Fame as of March 2019 are in this book, some are featured more prominently. It would have made the book too hefty if we had devoted two pages to each of the women. We thus decided to pick, for more prominent display, the 100 stories that would resonate best with children. And to identify these 100 most inspiring stories, we sought the advice of children.

In the second quarter of 2020, as we battened down the hatches in the battle against Covid-19, some 400 students of St. Anthony’s Canossian Secondary School spent a few days on an online project, reading and discussing the stories of the 160 women in the Hall of Fame. Their comments helped us decide on the 100 stories to feature more prominently.

We then commissioned 10 women illustrators, some who are well-established and others who are emerging talents, and randomly assigned 10 profiles to each. We asked them to read the profiles of the women on the Hall of Fame website, and to capture in their illustrations the essence of the woman and her achievements. They did exactly this, in a delightfully varied range of portraiture styles. The profiles appear in the book in no particular order, but with an eye to the most engaging display of these varying styles.



## Project Awesome

As the production of the book entered its final stages, we reached out to various individuals and organisations to seek their support with pre-orders for the book and with donations to Project Awesome: Dare to Dream. These Awesome Supporters who responded are listed on page 219.

The support for Project Awesome will allow us to present every primary and secondary school in Singapore, and the children's and young people's homes, with complimentary copies of this book. We will also offer the schools and homes lesson plans and interactive tools to help teachers use the stories of our awesome women to inspire our children and develop core values and personal skills.

We thank everyone who has contributed over the years to the growth of the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame, and more recently to the publication of this book and the shaping of Project Awesome. Most of all, we must thank the women who are in the Hall of Fame—the boundary breakers and record holders, the risk-takers and changemakers, the role models and the standard setters.

They were the women who, at a time when social norms set limits on what a woman could do, pushed back the barriers and led the way for others. They are, today, the women who are shaping our society with their vision and passion, their enterprise and leadership, their talent and creativity, and their humanity.

They are all, quite simply, awesome!

Margaret Thomas

March 2021

.....

**May the stories of these women who  
dared to dream inspire you to turn  
your own dreams into reality.**

.....

## ESTHER TAN CHENG YIN

### NAVAL DIVER

**E**sther Tan Cheng Yin is proof that size doesn't matter. The slight-of-build 1.55m-tall tough-as-nails major, formerly in the elite Naval Diving Unit, has a long list of achievements, including being Singapore's first female naval diver. Disposing of bombs and rescuing people at sea—all the while carrying 39kg of equipment—were just part of the job.

Esther takes part in international marathons, triathlons, Ironman races and other adventure activities all around the world. She has even climbed Mount Everest! After two years of training and preparation, Esther and her teammates set out on their Everest adventure in 2011. However, strong winds and bad weather made it impossible for her to reach the top of the mountain safely. Just 100m before the summit, she had to make the difficult decision to turn back.

If you think scaling mountains and diving the seas weren't enough, get this—Esther's stint with the navy took her on a four-month deployment on a navy frigate to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden. This woman fought pirates!

BORN 1975



## INDRANEE ELIZABETH NADISEN

### FOSTER MOTHER EXTRAORDINAIRE

Indranee Elizabeth Nadisen began to find life boring when, in 1976, all her six children were in school. So, she signed on as a foster mother with the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF)'s Fostering Scheme. Over the course of 32 years, she fostered more than 40 children.

The children she looked after included those who were abandoned, abused or neglected. She treated every one of them as her own, shedding tears each time they left for their adoptive homes or were reunited with their families.

She would foster each child for an average of two years. It was always painful when the children were adopted or returned to their parents, but she would be happy for them to have found a proper home. She is Singapore's longest-serving foster mother who has looked after the greatest number of children in need. For that, Indranee received the MSF's first-ever Outstanding Lifetime Volunteer Award in 2009.

BORN 1940



## MARGARET LENG TAN

### PIANIST

Not many people would consider a toy piano to be a real musical instrument, but Margaret Leng Tan does. She also uses other objects such as bicycle bells, music boxes, tin cans and teapots to make music!

Margaret started piano lessons at six. When she was 16, she was awarded a scholarship to New York City's Juilliard School after winning the Singapore Annual Piano Competition a year earlier. In 1971, she became the first woman to earn a doctorate in musical arts from Juilliard. Margaret's toy piano debut was in 1993 when she played American composer and mentor John Cage's "Suite for Toy Piano" in New York. The music world was captivated. Since then, she has created many great works, including albums such as *The Art of the Toy Piano*.

Margaret once said, "Whether you ultimately achieve your goal or not is inconsequential. It is the process that counts. Keep your antennae up; you may very well find that digressions from your chosen path may turn out to be the most meaningful after all."

BORN 12 DECEMBER 1945



## GEORGETTE CHEN

### ARTIST

Georgette Chen is widely regarded as the most important female artist in Singapore. Born into a wealthy family in the Chinese province of Zhejiang, Georgette travelled a lot as a child. She was exposed to art from a young age and studied at The Art Students League of New York in 1926, before going to Paris.

There, Georgette's paintings were accepted for an exhibition. It was the first time her work was exhibited, and it was a rare achievement for a young Chinese female artist. That year, she also got married to a Chinese diplomat and politician, Eugene Chen.

When Eugene died in 1944, Georgette travelled around Asia. She got married again, but this second marriage only lasted a few years. In 1953, Georgette moved to Singapore.

A year later, Georgette became the first woman to be appointed as a teacher at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). She taught part-time at NAFA for many years, and was much loved and respected by her students.

Georgette's works are in great demand and have been sold at international art auctions for millions of dollars. "Art," she once wrote, "never tires, never bores; it revives and uplifts."

BORN OCTOBER 1906 – DIED 15 MARCH 1993



## MORE AWESOME WOMEN

Visit the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame website at [www.swhf.sg](http://www.swhf.sg) for more information about all the women!



**Alice Pennefather**  
Sportswoman

Alice Pennefather was one of the most outstanding sportswomen of her time. An all-rounder, she was Singapore's first women's singles badminton champion, and the first non-European woman tennis champion since the women's singles event began in 1933. Alice played a pivotal role in building the Girls' Sports Club's hockey team into one of Singapore's leading teams.



**Anastasia Gan Kum Yoke**  
Pilot

Anastasia Gan Kum Yoke soared in both the military and civilian aviation spheres. She was among the first women pilots of the Republic of Singapore Air Force, and its first female flying instructor. After 23 years in the air force where she rose to the rank of major, she joined SilkAir in 2001 and became Singapore's first female commercial pilot.



**Anita Sarawak**  
Singer

A household name in Singapore when she was barely out of her teens, Anita Sarawak was one of the first Asian performers to make it in the US. She performed at top venues where she drew large crowds with her vocal prowess and energetic performances. When a Las Vegas nightclub offered her a contract, she jumped at the chance to break into the American music industry.



**Anne Lee Tzu Pheng**  
Poet

Singapore's foremost female poet, Anne Lee Tzu Pheng, has five volumes of poetry to her name, three of which have won National Book Development Council of Singapore awards. Contemplative and lyrical, Tzu Pheng's poetry grapples with themes of identity and progress, and most recently, her Catholic faith.



**Charlotte Elizabeth Ferguson-Davie**  
Doctor

Charlotte Elizabeth Ferguson-Davie was a medical doctor. Her transformative work in Singapore began in 1913, when she established the St. Andrew's Medical Mission to provide specialised healthcare for women and children. Over the next decade, she founded more of such clinics, and the St. Andrew's Mission Hospital opened in 1923.



**Christina Ong**  
Entrepreneur

Christina Ong is a global fashion and lifestyle entrepreneur. She presides over the sprawling COMO Group, whose businesses span across hospitality, fashion, wellness, organic living and specialty foods. The COMO Foundation, meanwhile, works with partners to transform communities by helping to ensure that women and girls are educated, engaged and economically secure.



**Tan Chew Neo**  
Community Worker

Tan Chew Neo was a pioneer community and social worker. She served on the committee of the Po Leung Kuk and was a key mover in the revival of the Chinese Ladies' Association, rallying its members to help in the war relief work. She was made a Justice of the Peace in 1947 and she regularly visited women prison inmates.



**Theresa Foo**  
Banker

In her 35-year banking career, Theresa Foo made history twice. In 1977, she was the first woman to be made a vice president in the Bank of America's Singapore operations. She scored another first when she became Standard Chartered Bank's first Asian female chief executive.



**Wong-Lee Siok Tin**  
Broadcaster

Wong-Lee Siok Tin became the first woman to head the Ministry of Culture's Department of Broadcasting in 1978. When the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation was formed, Siok Tin was its deputy general manager and then general manager.



**Yu-Foo Yee Shoon**  
Politician

Yu-Foo Yee Shoon was one of three women to be elected as members of Parliament in 1984, ending the House's 14-year dearth of women. In 2001, she became the first woman mayor. Earlier, she was a trailblazer in the trade union movement, joining the National Trades Union Congress as a senior industrial relations officer and eventually becoming its deputy secretary-general.



## AWESOME SUPPORTERS

**SPECIAL THANKS TO ALL THOSE WHO HELPED MAKE THIS AMAZING BOOK A REALITY.**

- Deloitte Singapore
- Amalgamated Union of Statutory Board Employees
- Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE)
- Healthcare Services Employees' Union
- Janet Ang
- Jia Foundation
- Dr Kanwaljit Soin
- Linda Locke
- Mary Hoe-Tan
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Mothers and Educators
- NTUC Women and Family Unit
- Pek Lay Peng
- Procter & Gamble
- Soh Lai Yee
- Professor Tommy Koh
- United Women Singapore
- Yu-Foo Yee Shoon





## AWESOME WOMEN WHO CREATED THIS BOOK

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### THE ILLUSTRATORS

**8EyedSpud** is a creative studio founded by Jacqueline Goh and Natalie Kwee. With over 12 years of collective illustration experience, they combine their wild senses of humour and the whimsical nature of drawing to produce meaningful (and fun!) work.

See pages 19, 35, 47, 75, 95, 133, 143, 151, 169 and 195.

**Angee Neo** creates drawings with an emphasis on storytelling with compelling characters. Her quirky, surreal and whimsical works have breathed life into children's books such as *The Rock and the Bird*, *The Crane and the Crab*, *The Trampolines that Nadia Built*, and *Do Gallery Sitters Sit All Day? Things People Really Do in a Museum*.

See pages 13, 41, 49, 81, 107, 117, 131, 149, 187 and 197.

**Arai Kreva**, whose real name is Raihana Abdul Rahman, is a visual artist dedicated to urban arts and illustration. She pursues creative endeavours headfirst with big curiosity and an even bigger passion. Her eye for detail transforms her artworks into stories and conversations for her audience.

See pages 7, 25, 45, 59, 85, 105, 125, 161, 167 and 191.

**Cheng Puay Koon** is an international best-selling author who loves drawing for children. She has illustrated over 70 picture books, including the Abbie Rose and the Magic Suitcase series created with popular writer Neil Humphreys.

See pages 5, 29, 53, 69, 93, 109, 137, 157, 175 and 181.

**Hafi**, whose real name is Hafizah Jainal, is a designer who draws. She makes visual interpretations through illustration, design and self-portraiture. Her images often stem from the frank and absurd, but are still relatable.

See pages 9, 33, 43, 65, 99, 121, 139, 145 and 171.

**Kim Nguyen** is an illustrator and graphic designer. Beyond her editorial work, her personal practice is centred on the convergence of fiction and reality, with a focus on using alternative narrative formats to examine individual identity, social systems and the lived experience.

See pages 17, 37, 55, 71, 91, 119, 141, 147, 165 and 193.

**Natalie Christian Tan** is an illustrator and graphic designer. She dreams up imagery for publishers and local arts entities like the Singapore Drama Educators Association, Ethos Books, Asiapac Books and Delere Press.

See pages 3, 61, 77, 83, 101, 123, 153, 159, 179 and 199.

**Niki Koh** is an illustrator and graphic designer who passionately experiments with various visual styles. With her art, she tries to explore feelings of beauty, fear, humour and comfort through a personal lens, and hopes that others may find the same things too.

See pages 15, 23, 39, 57, 73, 87, 113, 135, 155, 173 and 183.

**Nisa' Tuzzakirah S.** is an illustrator, all-rounder creative and maker of magical and meaningful things. She is passionate about growth and hope, the exploration of being human, finding joy in normal everyday things and the empowerment of women.

See pages 11, 27, 63, 79, 103, 111, 127, 177, 189 and 201.

**Shana Kamaldin** (@littlecorals) is an illustrator who specialises in ink and watercolour. Inspired primarily by nature and botany, her preferred subject matters include local bird species and oddly shaped plants.

See pages 21, 31, 51, 67, 89, 97, 115, 129, 163 and 185.





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### THE WRITERS

**Debbie Chia** is a writer at Singapore's Hedgehog Communications. She is now based in Berlin with her husband and son. A former intern for the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations during her university days, she also leads a second life as a DJ and record label owner.

**Dr Phyllis Chew** is the past president of the Association of Women for Action and Research, as well as the University Women's Association (Singapore) and the English Language and Literature Teachers' Association. She was Fulbright's and the Leverhulme Trust's visiting professor on language, gender and comparative religion from 2010 to 2011.

### THE EDITOR

**Margaret Thomas** spent more than two decades as a journalist. She now works mainly on book projects and in various voluntary roles on the pursuit of gender equality. A founder member in 1985 of the feminist group Association of Women for Action and Research, she has chaired the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame committee since 2013.

When we launched the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame in 2014, we knew that we would at some point want to publish a children's book, or a series of books, about the women. Various ideas were discussed with publishers over the years. It was Epigram Books that came up with the most compelling proposal. So thank you, Edmund and Julia of Epigram, for helping us frame the concept for the book and then getting the content into shape and the book into publication.

As we began to flesh out ideas for the book, Edmund and I realised we were both looking at the international best-seller *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women* as a model to emulate. It's a wonderful way to bring to young people the inspiring stories of our outstanding women. So thank you, Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo, for your excellent book; we have borrowed many ideas from it.

Thanks also to St. Anthony's Canossian Secondary School for helping us to identify the 100 stories that will be of greatest interest and inspiration to children. And to the writers who reworked the profiles to suit the palates of young readers, and the artists who found so many creative ways to capture the essence of the women.

Finally, this book could not have come about without the support and hard work of the Hall of Fame team at the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations. Selina, Denise, Nasim—it's been a blast working with you to bring to life our plans for *Awesome Women of Singapore*.

Margaret Thomas  
Chair of the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame Committee  
Singapore Council of Women's Organisations



## CREATE YOUR OWN AWESOME STORY



A series of 20 horizontal blue lines provided for writing a story.



## DRAW YOUR OWN PORTRAIT



A large empty rectangular box provided for drawing a portrait.

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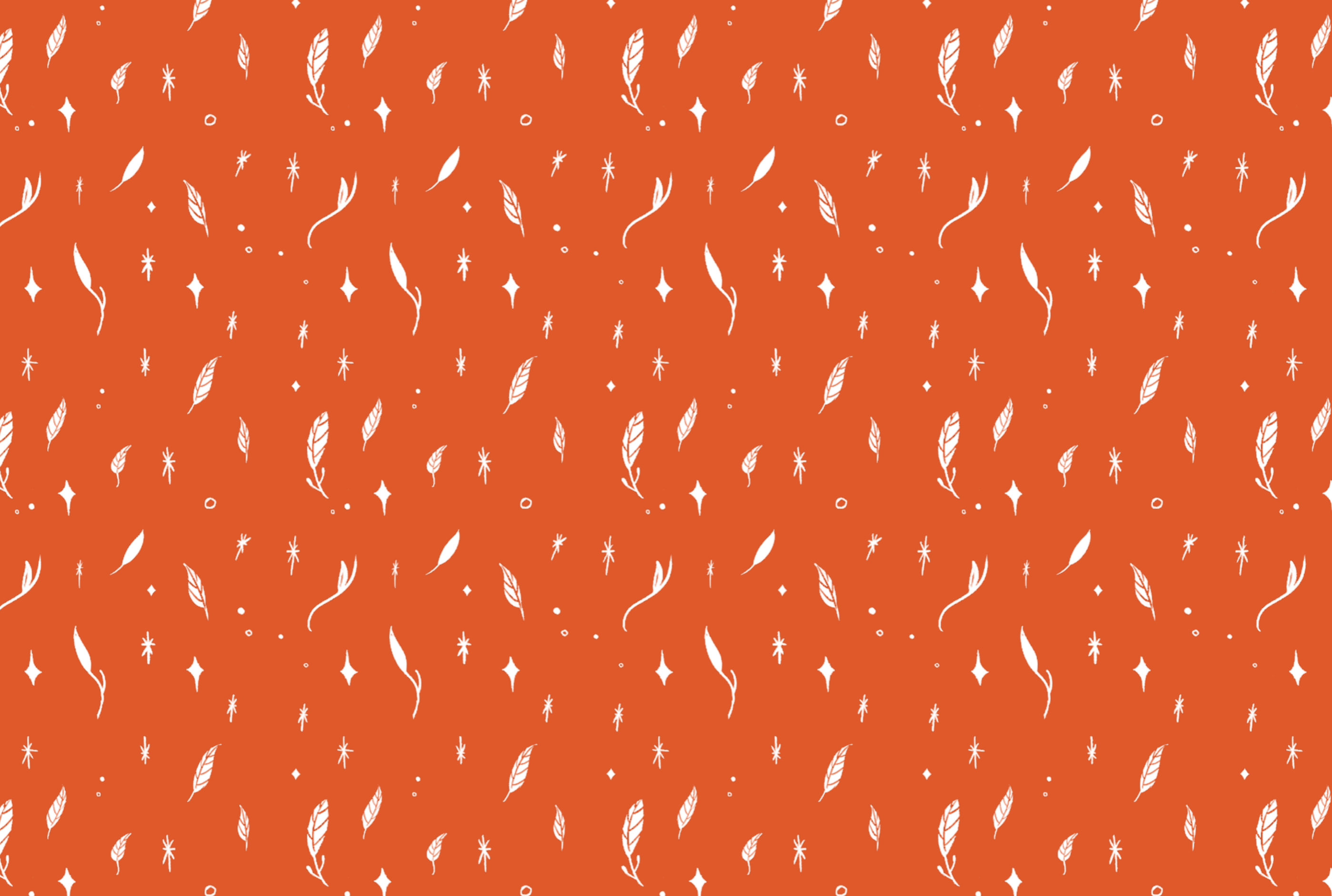
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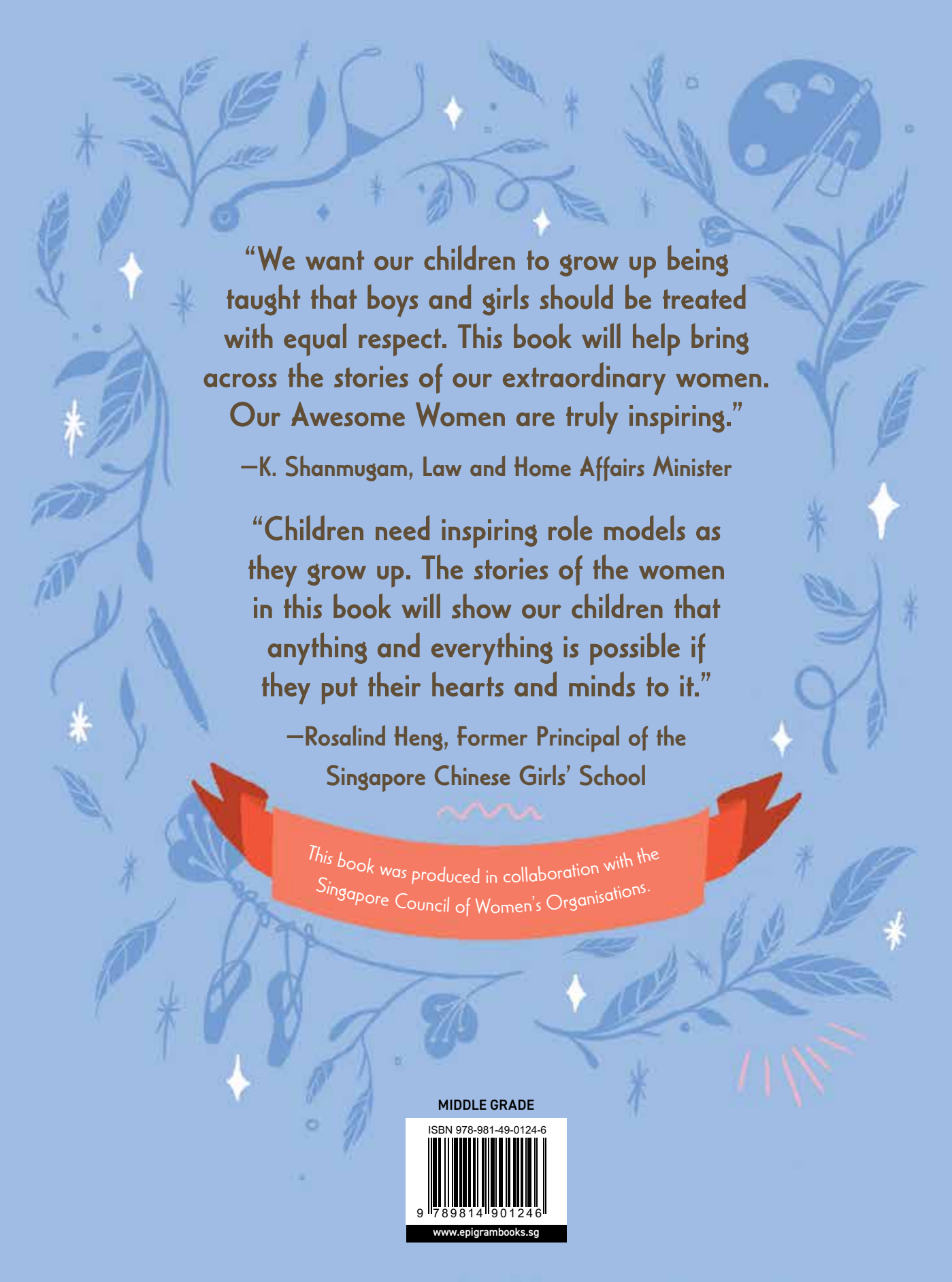
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**“We want our children to grow up being taught that boys and girls should be treated with equal respect. This book will help bring across the stories of our extraordinary women. Our Awesome Women are truly inspiring.”**

**—K. Shanmugam, Law and Home Affairs Minister**

**“Children need inspiring role models as they grow up. The stories of the women in this book will show our children that anything and everything is possible if they put their hearts and minds to it.”**

**—Rosalind Heng, Former Principal of the Singapore Chinese Girls’ School**



*This book was produced in collaboration with the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations.*

**MIDDLE GRADE**

ISBN 978-981-49-0124-6



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