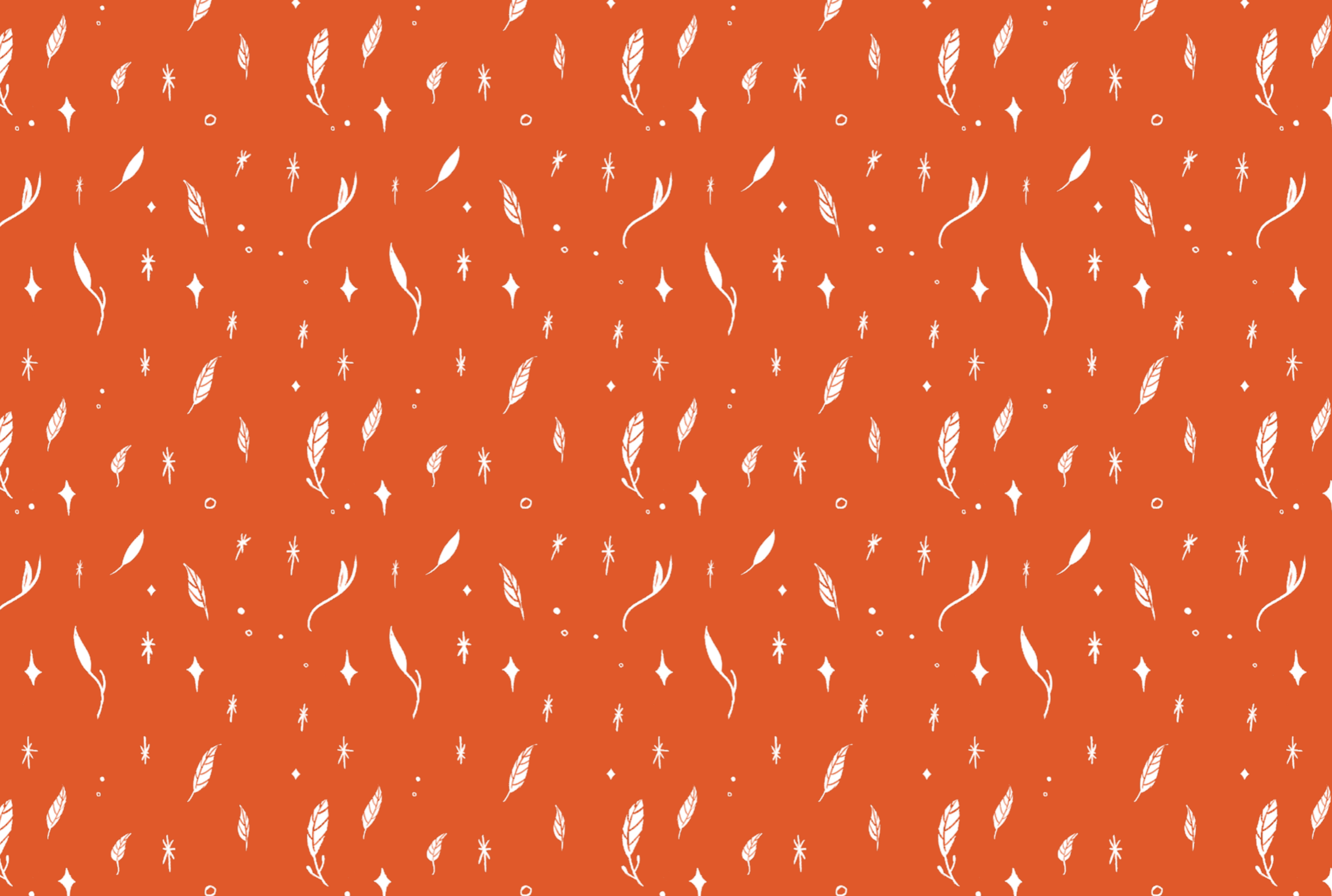


AWESOME
WOMEN OF
SINGAPORE

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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AWESOME WOMEN OF SINGAPORE

EDITED BY MARGARET THOMAS

E
EPIGRAM



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EDITOR'S NOTE

“I am a girl and 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 ten women illustrators, some well-established and others who are emerging talents, and randomly assigned ten 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. Those who responded are listed on the Supporters page.

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

NAVY DIVER

Esther 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 navy diver. Disposing bombs and rescuing people at sea—all the while carrying 39 kilograms of equipment—was just part of the job.

Esther takes parts 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 wasn'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's Fostering Scheme. Over the course of thirty-five years, she fostered a total of forty-five 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 to be 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 Ministry of Social and Family Development'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 sixteen, she was awarded a scholarship to New 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



MORE AWESOME WOMEN

Visit the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame website at 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 soared in both the military and civilian aviation spheres. She topped the Singapore Armed Forces' Officer Cadet Course, then joined the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF). She earned her pilot's wings as a transport pilot and became the first female Qualified Flying Instructor.

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 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 such clinics, and the St. Andrew's Mission Hospital opened in 1913.

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.

Chua Jim Neo
Chef and author



Chua Jim Neo, better known as Mrs Lee Chin Koon, wrote her definitive Mrs Lee's Cookbook in 1974 when she was sixty-seven years old. She wanted future generations to have access to the intricacies of the Peranakan cuisine. The book, reprinted many times, is considered one of the most authoritative on Peranakan cuisine in Singapore.

Constance Goh
Activist



Constance Goh was a pioneering activist in the family planning movement both in Singapore and around the world. Together with some others, Constance set up the Singapore Family Planning Association in 1949. There was much opposition from religious groups, but Constance and her colleagues persevered and spread the word about family planning.

Constance Mary Turnbull
Historian



Constance Mary Turnbull was a historian who was recognised for her comprehensive documentation of the growth of modern Singapore. She first published *A History of Singapore 1819–1975* in 1977, which is regarded by many as the definitive history of Singapore, and is a key reference for the National Education programme in schools.

Cynthia Goh
Doctor



Cynthia Goh worked to establish and transform palliative health care in Singapore for over two decades. She started as a volunteer doctor at the St Joseph's Home and Hospice in 1985, then in 1989, together with other volunteers, she set up the Hospice Care Association.

Eleanor Ann Clunies-Ross
Athlete



Eleanor Ann Clunies-Ross was a sprint champion. She smashed the 1951 Interschool Athletics Championships' 100-yard sprint record with her timing of 12.4 seconds. She twice qualified for the Olympics but was not selected for the Singapore contingent. Undeterred, she pressed on and tried other events.

Elizabeth Sam
Banker



Elizabeth Sam became the first female board member of the Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation in 1996. The first half of her career was spent in the Ministry of Finance and the Monetary Authority of Singapore where she played a key role in the growth of Singapore as a global financial centre.

Tan Chew Neo
Community Worker



Tan Chew Neo was a pioneer community and social worker. She served on the committee of the Poh 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 regularly visited women prison inmates.

Theresa Foo
Banker



In her thirty-five-year banking career, Theresa Foo made history twice. In 1977, she was the first woman in Bank of America's Singapore operations to be made a vice-president. 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 fourteen-year dearth of women. In 2001, she became the first woman mayor. 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

THE ILLUSTRATORS

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

Anngee Neo creates drawings with an emphasis on storytelling with compelling characters. Her quirky, surreal and whimsical works have breathed life to 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*.

Araikreva, 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.

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

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.

Niki Koh is an illustrator and graphic designer who passionately experiments with various visual styles and social issues. 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.

Nisa' Tuzzakirah 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.

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.

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.

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.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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 of Singapore and the English Language and Literature Teachers' Association. She was Fulbright 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 working 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, evenly spaced, providing a template for writing a story.



DRAW YOUR OWN PORTRAIT



A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for drawing a portrait.

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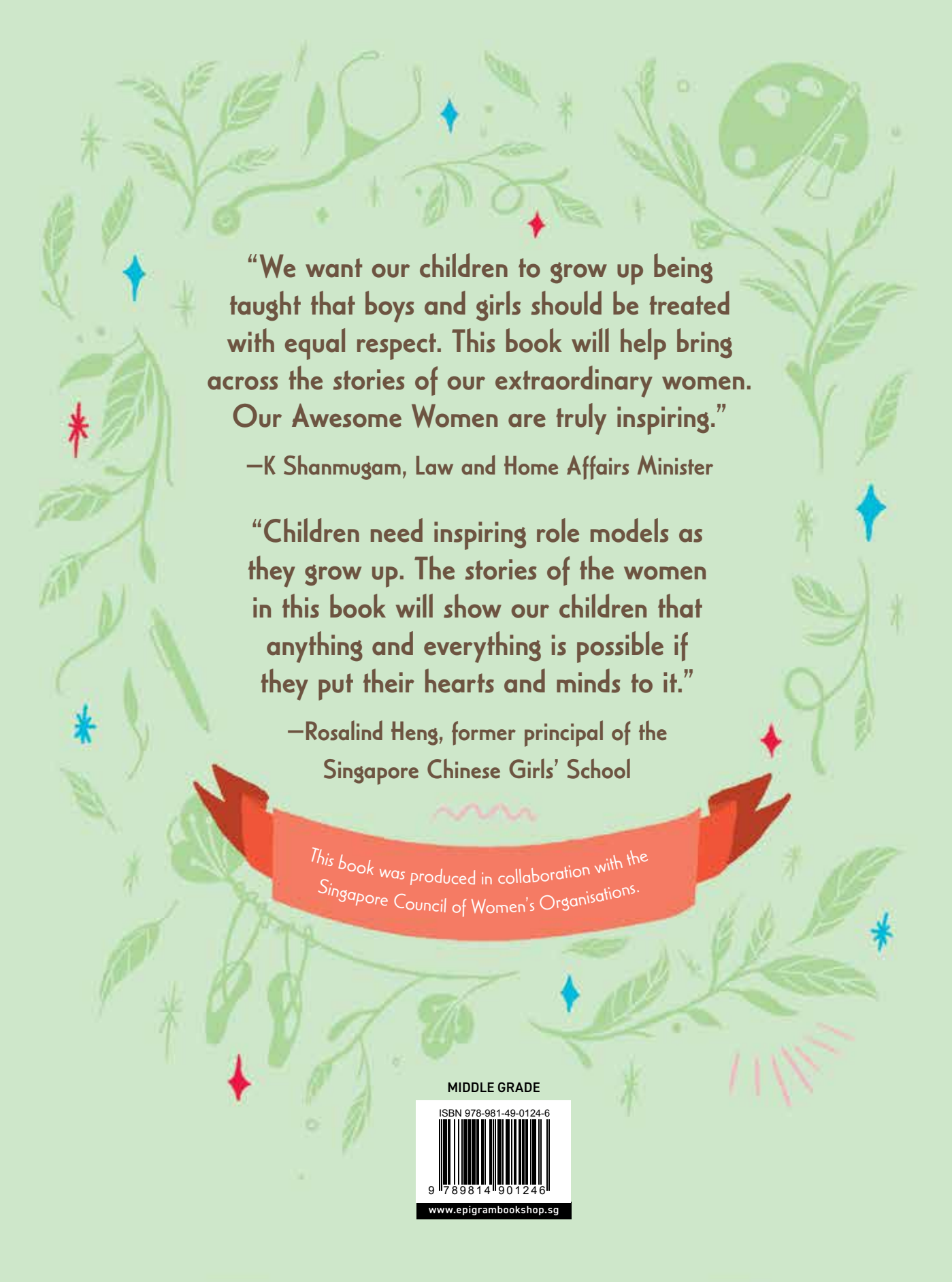
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“We want our children to grow up being taught that boys and girls should be treated with equal respect. This book will help bring across the stories of our extraordinary women. Our Awesome Women are truly inspiring.”

—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

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