

SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

GLASS CATHEDRAL
ANDREW KOH



ANDREW KOH is best known for his award-winning novella *Glass Cathedral*, which won the 1994 Singapore Literature Prize Commendation Award. Koh was a founding member of The Necessary Stage and has published various works, from academic papers to poetry. He has also co-authored several Literature textbooks for schools in Singapore.

Koh read English Literature at the National University of Singapore and has worked in Singapore and London. He now works in the healthcare sector and lives in Sydney.

GLASS CATHEDRAL

OTHER BOOKS IN THE SINGAPORE CLASSICS SERIES

Scorpion Orchid by Lloyd Fernando

The Immolation by Goh Poh Seng

The Scholar and the Dragon by Stella Kon

The Adventures of Holden Heng by Robert Yeo

ANDREW KOH



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To Mark Koh,
for sharing the journey

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Introduction by Robert Yeo

IN AN ARTICLE comparing this novella to a “gay” novel entitled *Peculiar Chris*, first published in 1992, the critic writes that *Glass Cathedral* “traces the narrator’s struggle to reconcile sexuality and faith amidst the socio-economic pressures of Singapore.”¹ This is a very apt description of what the book is about and this essay will elaborate on it. At the same time, while comparison with *Peculiar Chris* is useful, it is just as pertinent to place this novella in the context of the English-language theatre in the 1990s in Singapore. In that period, playwrights felt compelled to address themes about gay men and lesbian women, and the compulsion points to a possible patterned response to stimulus in the city state of Singapore. The laws governing homosexual behaviour as stated in the constitution, and the enforcement of them, are joined with the majority heterosexual view, and these severely constrict the actions of what is perceived as deviant, minority behaviour.

Peculiar Chris (1992) is Singapore’s first “gay” novel in English. The local play, *The Lady of Soul & Her Ultimate “S” Machine* (1993), is a satire about governmental bureaucracy with two male civil servants in a relationship and demonstrating it by holding

hands secretly. Similarly, *Mergers & Acquisitions* (1993) and *Wills & Secession* (1995) are part of The Eleanor Wong Trilogy entitled *Invitation to a Treat*; the third play *Jointly and Severally* was staged in April 2003. All three trace the loving but stressed relationship of two women, Ellen Toh and Lesley Ryan, and Ellen and members of her family. When *Wills & Secession* and *Glass Cathedral* appeared in the same year, it seemed to be the culmination of a part of a small wave of gay/lesbian fiction and drama and it troubled the licensing authorities and of course, the government.

Plays attracted more attention than novels for two reasons; firstly, theatre is live performance and secondly, plays need licences for public performance. One government response, on behalf of the conservative, heterosexual majority, was to appoint a censorship review committee to comprehensively consider the regulation of all forms of expression. The first was set up in 1992 and I was a member of that committee, which submitted its report in the same year. A government website entitled Censorship Review Committee (CRC) has this significant paragraph: “The CRC 1992 also commissioned a survey to ascertain public reaction to some censorship issues and gauge whether there has been a shift in moral values since the last censorship review in 1981. The survey showed that Singaporeans held a strong regard for the traditional family unit and resisted other lifestyles which were perceived to be at odds with the belief. The survey also showed that Singaporeans were deeply influenced by their religious beliefs and moral principles.”²

This quotation provides the context for my reading of *Glass Cathedral*.

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Section 377A of the Constitution of Singapore states: “Any male person, who in public or private, commits or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by a male person of, an act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years.”

Given this draconian law, I put it to the author that from Colin’s point of view, it was not the best of times to be both gay and Catholic in Singapore. His reply was, “That was the feeling. While matters may have improved in Singapore, it still is not a good time to be gay. The Christian churches are powerful and across the denominations, they have become more evangelical. The Catholic church under Pope John Paul II grew towards ultra conservatism and has continued to be so under Benedict XVI.”³

The situation as described above is demonstrated in the novella. Colin makes several negative references to his church; for example, “The Church’s professionals might be progressive when it comes to socio-political matters, but tended to be stiff when confronted with the wilderness of human sexuality. The braver ones like Charles Curran and John McNeil inevitably

got shut up by the old crows in the Vatican.”⁴

Colin’s dilemma is exacerbated by the ironic fact that he is loved by two men. When he tells his priest of his developing relationship with James, he is surprised by Father Norbert’s confession that the latter, too, loves him. It is one of the most poignant moments of the book:

“Oh Colin, I’ve done you wrong.”

I pulled away to see him better.

“You haven’t. You’ve been very kind to me.”

“You don’t know...I love you, Colin, I always have,” he cried.⁵

What Colin does not suspect is what would happen to his relationship to both James and Father Norbert.

The Church’s heavy hand is shown again when Father Norbert is forced to leave the priesthood because he is suspected of being too friendly with the prostitutes he counsels. Rather than choose to fight papal authority, he leaves to become a teacher. Colin loses the second male person with whom he has a warm, non-sexual relationship, in contrast to his physical, confrontational association with James.

In Father Norbert, presented sympathetically, we have a certain idealistic picture of Catholic priesthood. He comes across as understanding and accepting of differences both religious and sexual; open in his interpretation of some of the difficult edicts of his Church, and always there for Colin.

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A useful comparison can be made with Lloyd Fernando’s novel *Scorpion Orchid*, in two ways. Both are “campus” novels and the campus is the present National University of Singapore in Kent Ridge, which is the setting of Koh’s novel, whilst Fernando’s book is located in the Bukit Timah campus of the University. Not surprising, both are coming-of-age fiction, involving young, impressionable men. The difference is, *Scorpion Orchid* deals with racial, whilst *Glass Cathedral*, with male-gender differences. Both present, through “insider” knowledge, and with much insight, candour and sensitivity, some of the problems of growing up in Singapore in the 1950s and in the 1990s.

Robert Yeo, 2011

NOTES:

1. Paul Yeoh, *Writing Singapore Gay Identities: Queering the Nation in Johan S. Lee’s Peculiar Chris and Andrew Koh’s Glass Cathedral*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2006, p. 41.
2. Censorship Review Committee, 1992. <http://www.mda.gov.sg/public/consultation/pages/CRC.aspx>
3. Andrew Koh, in email reply to me, 27 July 2011.
4. Andrew Koh, *Glass Cathedral*, Epigram Books, Singapore, 2011, p. 56.
5. *Ibid*, p. 45.

GLASS CATHEDRAL

1

ENGLISH. THAT WAS where I met him. In Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, to be precise. We were in the same tutorial in our first year. Our tutor was a genial young woman who had recently become a "doctor", enthusiastic and largely speaking over our heads, especially the men's. Two years of National Service as a war machine led to a loss of literary interest in the men. I caught him in the droning of the tutor, casting his attention on me. Sometimes he would stare for a minute or two, making me feel like I had sprouted pimples all over my face. His eyes would dart away from their object at my slightest move, the pretence of non-attention. Really, it was a wonder that none of the women noticed. We were the only two of six, as was usual in the English class.

"...can be seen in Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and Jane Austen's *Persuasion*..." the tutor went on. I had read both but despite my best efforts, I could not follow her rather involved comparison of the two authors' works. He looked like he frequented the gym but it could have been the army's conditioning. Jeans and a tee, typical undergrad dress.

"Has anyone read these books?" Almost all had completed Austen but few had heard of Calvino, except him. The tutor

squealed in delight, followed by a deluge of praise for the Italian.

“Anyone else?”

“I’ve read it but don’t quite understand what he was doing.” Her ecstasy was a little overwhelming. Mine was about to be aroused. What possessed me to look at him after my reply remained a mystery, for a short while at least. He returned the compliment with a smile. His eyes were shining with pleasure at my revelation. I was embarrassed. The tutor’s eloquence and erudite arguments were no match for his language.

“So you read *Invisible Cities* too. Hey, you got time? Shall we have tea or something and talk over it?” he asked as we were leaving the room.

“Er, yeh. Why not? I’m sorry, I forget your name.”

“James. And you’re Colin, right?”

He took me to a corner of the canteen, below the area reserved for the staff. Breezy, lined with bushes, with the West Coast and the sea for a backdrop. Could one have asked for a more contrasting scene to discuss cities, visible or otherwise? Tea? Yes. And a banana cake please. Does he always wear such tight jeans? Hmm. No lines. Doesn’t he feel hot? In this climate? Well, I’m feeling hot. Pleasant? Yes, so far he is. Is he like me? Is he one? The stares.

“Here’s your tea and cake. Where do you come from? I mean your JC,” he asked, handing me our excuses for a chat.

“CJC. And you?”

Hwa Chong. The premier junior college. He didn’t strike me as a typical Hwa Chong guy, you know, straight, conventional, scien-

tific. And I didn’t strike him as a typical Catholic Junior College product: flamboyant, loud-mouthed and a stud. I laughed.

“You’re a Catholic, aren’t you?” he asked. “And you must have been from SJI. They all go the same route, the Christian Brothers Schools, and then to CJC. Also, that crucifix you’re wearing. I’m Catholic too. I go to Christ the King. You?”

“Risen Christ.”

“Ah. I’ve always found Catholicism problematic. Eternal Rome is all too human. Yet, people actually obey it.”

“You’re not the devout type, are you?” he added abruptly.

“What do you mean?” I replied cautiously.

“I mean, you’re not the type that believes in running after all the images of Mary, saying the rosary morning, noon and evening, that Jesus is really real in the bread and wine, that the Pope is infallible,” he hesitated, and then added sotto voce, “no wanking.” If I could blush I would have at that point.

“Well,” I hedged, “I do believe in some of the images...”

“No kidding!”

“Yeh!” I retorted. “I mean there’s a whole theology behind it. I don’t think you should just dismiss it like that.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realise. Not a good start to a friendship, is it? I really am sorry.”

“Really real?”

We laughed. The apology seemed sincere enough but I was piqued by his patronage and presumption. That was not, however, reason for me to discontinue our acquaintance. He had a certain

charm about him, what I had then described as innocence but no longer do. We did not have the time to talk religion or about the weather even. I had a tutorial in history to attend and needed to read up a little. I excused myself and got up to leave. He grinned at me. I was glad for the security of the file I was carrying.

I was weaving halfway through the whiffs and wafts of the food stalls when James tapped me on the shoulder from behind. He wanted to arrange a time when we could discuss religion. I was not sure if I wanted to. The sting still smarted. Nevertheless, I was thinking about the following week. He suggested the next day, at his place, three o'clock for tea. He would drive me there. I agreed, exchanged telephone numbers and left for class in a rush. No time to read by then.

The rest of the day was uneventful. The usual tutorials that saw no one speaking up. The women tended to fare better than the men. They were better read, able to offer intelligible if not intelligent comments where the men would either babble on or utter discourses that were best described as masturbatory. Tutorials could truly be circus-like. The fashion was for the men to impress the women not through academic prowess but through the all important "personal experiences". National Service counted as working experience and, in this economic miracle of an island, work is the *raison d'être* of one's patriotism.

The women, of course, had not the privilege of servicing the nation without remuneration. Social work did not count. Neither did motherhood. Hence, canteen stories of cliff climbing, parachuting,

crawling and hacking through the jungle, going to Taiwan for tiger shows both in the battlefield and in the bars, exercises in prophylactic security with broomsticks and bananas as simulated weapons; these were the stuff of what it meant to be a man, the progressive Singaporean male, trained to wield the powers of leadership. Maturity of mind and body was part of the package.

The listeners were often suitably bowled over by the discourses of the speakers, dishing out the appropriate "oohs" and "ahs" on cue.

I was a misnomer and an embarrassment in all this, the fair maiden in the midst of tanned bulging knights. I hated conscription, never was the athletic type, preferring a good treatise on the Transfiguration to an assault on Botak Hill. I did, however, appreciate the male beauty wrought by the callisthenics of the army, the drawing out of David from marble. Or James from the masses.

I waited for him at Centrepoint, allegedly the midpoint of the tourist stretch of Orchard Road. Congested is hardly the word to describe the place. What stench to emerge from wet bodies and soaked cotton-nylon-polyester was superceded by the emission from the rectums of metallic-vessels-on-tarmac. Upright men, women and teenagers drifting about felt like walking buildings. The crack in the mirror was merely physical; at least the towers of Babel could not close in, crowd round, cram, kick. I chose to ignore the concrete bastards but was in turn ignored by my fellow humankind.

I should turn green, I thought to myself. The ozone's really bad. I don't think I can put up with the weight of the humidity for the rest of my life. And the heat. God! The heat.

"Hey!" It was James. "You're quite a blur, aren't you? I've been holding up the traffic for some time now until I saw you standing there," he said as I got into the car.

"Do you know how many blue cars there are around here?" I asked him.

"One," he beamed and drove off to Dalvey Road in his new Mazda 323.

"Nice car. Yours or your family's?"

"Mine. Dad gave it to me for my twenty-first birthday. I call it my mobile home since I go out a lot. Most of my things are in the boot."

"Do we need to get anything on our way?" I enquired.

"Not unless you want to. What's there to buy anyway? I already bought from Temptations."

I shrugged. I was glad I was in the air-conditioned car. Orchard Road was not normally a good stretch to go through especially on a Saturday afternoon. We were caught in a jam.

"Do you always wear longs?" he asked, staring at my Man Master dark green trousers.

"Yes, most of the time. I don't feel appropriately dressed when I am in shorts. That's for the beach," I defended.

"Never heard of bermudas?"

He had a nice white pair on, a little tight around the seat, with

a loose but tucked in white tee bearing a sun-glassed hunk surfing on the waves of "Ocean Pacific".

"Who's home?"

No one was. James' father was some big time director of a multinational company. He refused to say which. His father was out playing golf with his colleagues. His mother moved in the upper social circles and was, in his own words, "God knows where." Both his elder sisters were married, the elder with a daughter, the younger was barren. All had their own houses invested in by their rich husbands. No brothers. He would be the sole inheritor, he declared triumphantly, if. He did not go on. We had arrived.

The house was fenced with bricks and fronted by a garden with well-pruned casuarina trees. In the corner opposite the driveway was a landscaped grotto, imitating, rather poorly I thought, that of Lourdes. Still, water slid down the fibreglass rocks, and two ugly statues with peeling paint, one of Bernadette and the other of the Virgin, graced the grotto. In the pond at the bottom of the "spring" were carp, the bright orange and red koi type looking healthily fat. Next to the grotto were three big bonsai plants cleverly twisted into the Chinese characters, "fu", "lu", "shou"—prosperity, wealth, longevity. One side was lined with small dragon pots of flowering marigolds while the other, directly opposite the porch, was decorated with golden shower orchids, all in full bloom and swaying in the sun, more in their laden stalks than any breeze.

The house itself was eclectic. The building had china blue tiles on its sloping roofs and the walls were white with latticed win-

dows. A pair of Corinthian pillars greeted us at the portico. White plastic garden tables and chairs were set on lime green ceramics. The doors to the house proper were big, twin, mahogany, square patterned, guarded by copper coloured aluminium gates. James released the Medeco padlock, the gate lock and the lock of the big doors.

“Come on.”

I left my shoes outside and stepped into what looked like a landing. To my right was an apparently large kitchen. Two flights of wooden staircases flanked my left, one leading down to a large, blue carpeted room, the other up.

“Emily,” James called into the kitchen. “Prepare the tea and take it to the living room.” He took my left wrist without a glance. “We’ll go to my room.”

I followed him up rather awkwardly and before I could get hold of my rising emotions, we reached a kind of lounge area.

A twenty-nine-inch Sony television presided darkly over potted ferns and two starlight blue sofas, each with glass-topped coffee tables on either side. Behind the telly were curtained bay windows. The bedrooms, of which there were four, had their entrances constructed such that one could not look into them from the stairs.

We padded across the shy blue carpet, away from the sofas. At a corner, James opened a door and exclaimed, “Voila!” Releasing my wrist, he extended his arms in embrace of his room.

“Nice,” I told him. Big cushions carefully strewn on the par-

quet floor created an atmosphere of relaxation. The rose white walls had aluminium framed reprints from Klimt, Renoir and Monet. A low bed lay beneath tinted windows. Near the entrance was the door leading to the bathroom.

“Nice,” I said again, grabbed a cushion and sat down in front of the diminutive bookshelves. “You don’t have many books, do you?” I remarked, scanning the blurb of Harold Robbins’ *Spellbinder*.

“Oh, these are just bedtime reading. I have a study room. It’s the one nearest the stairs. We’ll go there afterwards if you want.” He stretched over me and from a corner of the shelves produced a book. “You read him?”

David Leavitt, *The Lost Language of Cranes*.

“Uh-uh. Is he good?”

“Read for yourself. I found him interesting. Return it only after you’ve finished. Take your time.”

“Sir, tea is ready,” said the uniformed maid with a Filipino accent. I presumed it was Emily. James who was seated beside me by then, got up and led the way down to the other blue carpeted room.

The living room, as I learned from James, had seen many parties, ranging from the disco type to high-powered cocktail ones. Hence, the furniture was kept to the minimum to allow for rapid conversion to a dance floor. French windows formed two walls, opening onto a small lawn where a plastic table and chairs sat. A cane settee was placed in the centre of the room, facing a thirty-three-inch Sony telly, black. Two red leather bean bags and a side

table of pastries waited for us. I was glad to be out of the heat and humidity, and in the air-conditioned room.

“Isn’t this excessive?” I frowned playfully at the spread.

“Oh, shut up! Sit and eat, you fusspot,” he looked at me from under his eyelids.

“This is a very big house,” I remarked.

“Yeah, I know. What to do? My father’s rich; I can’t help it.”

“I wasn’t criticising you.”

James smiled. “I know. It’s just that sometimes I feel guilty being rich. You know, like when I see people who are not dressed in good clothes, or starving children on TV or in ads. But don’t worry,” he added on seeing my knitted brows, “the guilt doesn’t stay, or I’d have to give up my inheritance.” I smiled and continued eating my baked cheese.

“Isn’t Christ the King pretty far from here?” I asked just to break the nagging silence.

“It’s only a ten minute drive if I cut through the CTE expressway.”

“Yeh, but why Christ the King?”

“It’s air-conned.”

“So’s Risen Christ.”

“I don’t like Peter Low’s choir. Besides, I like the priests at Christ the King better. Their services are more dynamic, more dramatic.”

“You know, I don’t understand you,” I said. “You are so cynical about the Church, yet you still attend Mass.”

“Who said I go to Mass?”

“Please lah. If you don’t, you wouldn’t even bother to go all the way to Ang Mo Kio, nor would you notice that the services there are more, in your words, ‘dynamic’, ‘dramatic’. You’ve got a problem.”

“And what, pray tell, is that problem, Reverend Father?”

“A love-hate relationship,” I stated, and popped the last morsel of baked cheese into my mouth with a flourish.

“With Mother Church or the Reverend Fathers?”

I shouldn’t have laughed then and got myself choked. James hurried over and started patting me on the back.

“I’m all right,” I assured him after a while. “You can stop hitting me now.”

“You sure?” He looked at me with concern.

“Yeh. Reverend Fathers, indeed!” I snorted, and we laughed.

James shrugged his shoulders. He was back in his original place directly opposite me. He held his cup of coffee to his lips and kept his gaze on me. It was a few minutes before I noticed it, and only then because the silence had grown again, thus drawing my attention. I coughed to cover up my discomfort, my eyes averted all the while. I dared not look at him or in his direction. I must have fidgeted quite a bit, for he suddenly apologised.

“I’m sorry. Which camp did you say you were at?”

“I didn’t say,” I replied with a slight smile. “Anyway, I went to Khatib camp, after ITD and SAFINCO, of course. Yourself?”

“Oh, I was back at Tekong after my OCS training in Taiwan. I

PRAISE FOR
GLASS CATHEDRAL

Commendation Award, Singapore Literature Prize, 1994

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