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EVERY SCHOOL A GOOD SCHOOL

Fiction



NG ZIQIN

PRAISE FOR *EVERY SCHOOL A GOOD SCHOOL*

“Ziqin’s daring novel explores questions that we’ve all wanted to ask about education and our own individual identities. Do we change with our environment, or do we shape it? Do we have any control over our successes or failures? Who are we really? This is a must-read for those who have wondered how their lives might have turned out, if they’d only gone to a different school.”

—ADRIAN TAN, author of *The Teenage Textbook* and
The Teenage Workbook

“No one who has survived the pressure cooker-like education system in Singapore can possibly fail to relate to this quirky tale of two spunky teenagers out to challenge the status quo. Ng Ziqin’s young heroines are a breath of fresh air in YA Singlit.”

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And the Award Goes to Sally Bong!

“This novel brings me back to my own school experiences. If only I was half as smart and resourceful as Rowena and Janice! I enjoyed reading how these ordinary students from different points along the academic spectrum engage with their various hurdles, in order to form a new path for more students to follow.”

—PAULINE LOH, author of the *Leopop* trilogy

“An earnest look at the hopes we pin on Singapore’s education system and its meritocratic ideals. Ziqin’s novel is both charming and frank. It reaches across class lines in examining how different our formative years could be, if only we were given different opportunities to explore—whether we want them or not.”

—DARREN CHEN, author of *The Good Guys*

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EVERY SCHOOL A GOOD SCHOOL

NG ZIQIN

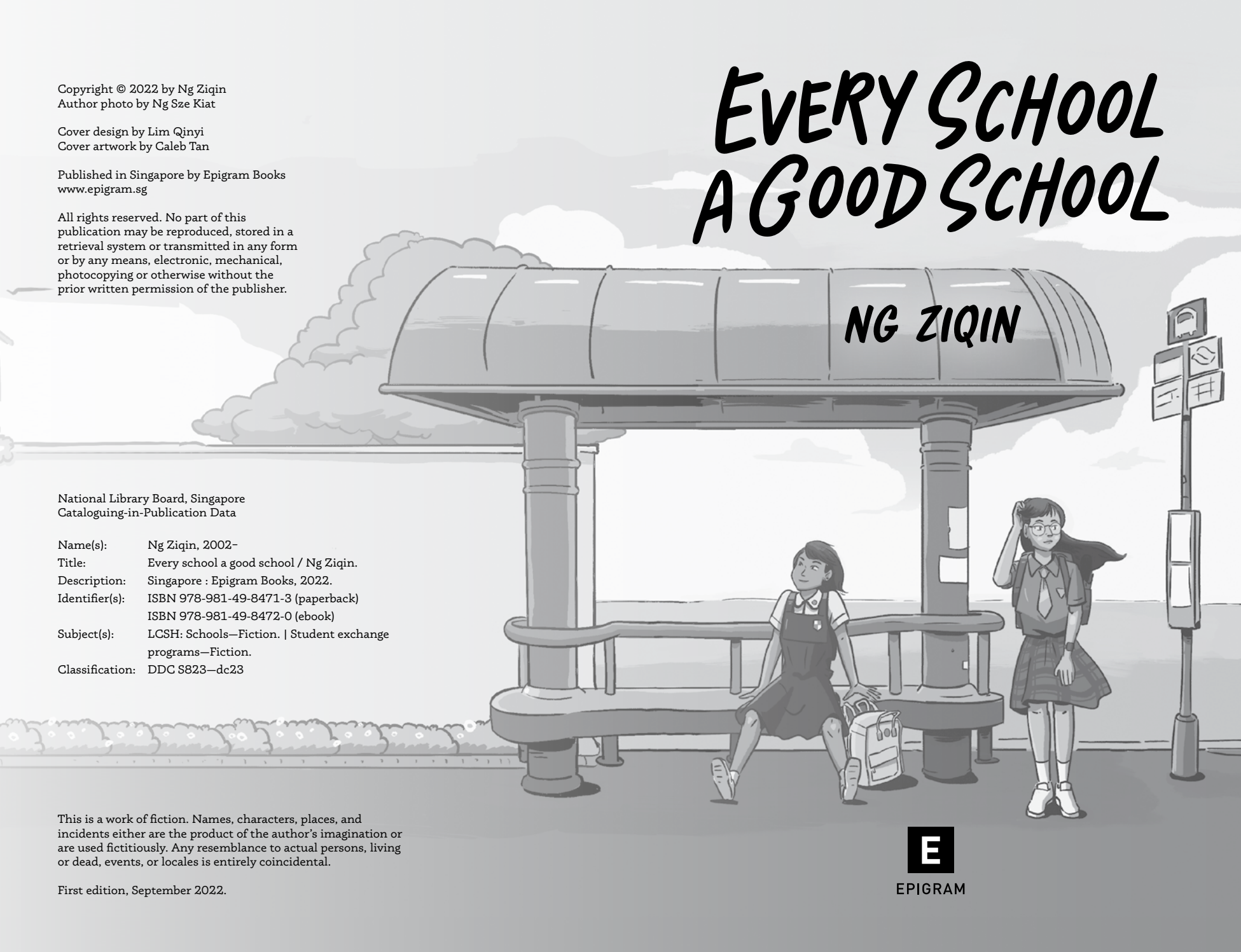
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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EPIGRAM



for my parents, who taught me to love books

PROLOGUE

“You have put me in a very difficult position today, Ms Law,” the prime minister said, in that clipped accent he had acquired in his university days abroad. He sipped calmly from his cup of kopi-O kosong; the kopitiam near Parliament House was as well-known for its discretion as it was for its kaya toast. “A Cabinet reshuffle is impending, including the position for the next minister for education. Despite your party affiliations, you are clearly the best woman for the job.”

Li-Ann didn't know what to make of the offer. What the prime minister was suggesting was not only unorthodox but unprecedented. Never before in Singapore's history had an opposition MP held the position of a Cabinet minister.

And yet, it wasn't entirely impossible. The prime minister was allowed to select from among the elected MPs to form the Cabinet. All the elected MPs, not just those elected from the party that formed the majority in Parliament.

But still, Li-Ann's doubts remained as she stirred her teh tarik anxiously.

Why her? Why now?

Li-Ann was a sociologist by training. Her research had focused on poverty, inequality, governance, state-society dynamics and, in particular, educational policy. But despite all that, Li-Ann had never thought of becoming a politician herself. She had often described it as the difference between being a food critic and being a chef.

But that was before she had agreed to run in the election as a favour to an old school friend, who had joined the People's Power Party, an opposition party contesting in Bukit Batok GRC that needed someone to make up the numbers. Then, unexpectedly, the public took a shine to her when she appeared in a televised debate about education policy in the lead-up to the elections.

From there, things had snowballed.

Li-Ann's fighting words might have struck a nerve, but they had also struck a chord, in particular with the school-going demographic. It had been an utterly surreal experience for Li-Ann when her teenage daughter, Rowena, had come home from school the next day and told her gleefully that all her classmates were making memes of the debate and Li-Ann's pithy soundbites.

"A few of the seniors even pasted up your photo in the canteen and created a tiny altar to 'Our Future minister for education' next to the chicken rice stall. It lasted the whole day until the discipline mistress stepped in and made them take it down," Rowena had said, making a face. "Weeeird!"

Even though her most ardent fans weren't quite old enough to vote yet, Li-Ann and her team had all won seats in an astonishing electoral victory. Thankfully, the mania died down soon after as the news cycle moved on to the next big thing: cute otters stealing fish from a condominium koi pond.

For the past few months, Li-Ann had contented herself with being a backbencher in Parliament. However, it seemed that the

prime minister had not been quite so quick to forget.

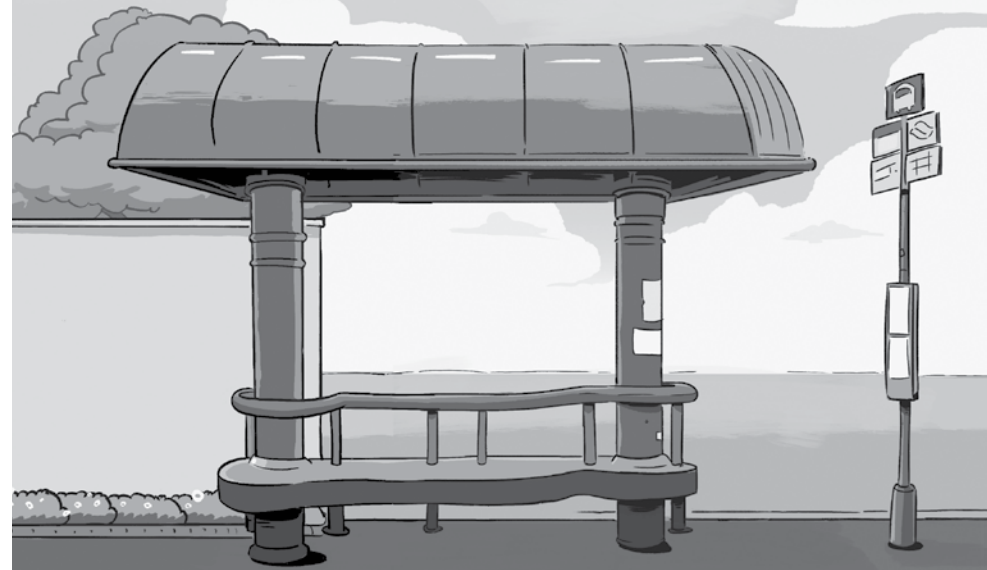
"What to do?" he said with a sigh, revealing an uncharacteristic vulnerability. It seemed completely at odds with his stern parliamentary persona, the one that was always pointing out the flaws in her speeches and criticising her party for being filled with dangerous demagogues and populists who would rather pander to public sentiment than knuckle down and do the research. "Sometimes I wonder if maybe we got it wrong in those early days. Back then, the thinking was that the pool of talent Singapore had to offer was so small that we couldn't possibly waste any of it. And so we funnelled virtually all our political talent through the same few tracks and experiences.

"Now, we have a lot of smart chaps. They're hard workers, and very earnest. But too homogenous. Too afraid to take risks. And the public sees them all as the same book-smart bureaucrats, too out of touch with sentiment on the ground to know what the people really want. What the people really *need*. But maybe what we need, more so in the Ministry of Education than in any other, is something that only *you* can give, Ms Law. Your creativity. Your charisma."

He looked at her expectantly, and in that moment, Li-Ann could see in his eyes a rare twinkle. Even though the prime minister and Li-Ann sat on opposite sides of Parliament, she could tell that something about them was the same at that moment. Perhaps it was foolish of her, but that something in her gut told her this was not a trap.

"So what say you, Ms Law?" asked the prime minister, in the manner of a man who was not used to being disappointed. "The job is yours. Will you take it?"

PART 1



CHAPTER 1

Everyone who worked at One North Buona Vista Drive—the Ministry of Education headquarters building—knew who the four most important people were: the minister for education, the minister of state (education), the permanent secretary, and the head janitor, Auntie Geok Peng.

Even though it came from an entirely different context and culture, an abbreviated version of the traditional Victorian rhyme of “something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue” described them quite aptly.

“Something blue” was easy. That would be Minister of State (Education) Maximilius Quek, who was renowned for his gloomy countenance. As a former Singapore Armed Forces general and central executive committee member of the incumbent ruling party, Quek had fully expected to be nominated for the portfolio of minister for education in the latest Cabinet reshuffle.

Unexpectedly, he had been played out by the prime minister’s astonishing pick: Law Li-Ann, who was the “something new”.

Next was Permanent Secretary of Education Carlsen Chiang, formerly a top-ranking civil servant in the Ministry of Defence, as

“something borrowed”. Ostensibly, his presence at the Ministry of Education was to lend his experience to the two relatively younger ministers who headed the Ministry. However, there was a rumour flying around that the seasoned bureaucrat had been planted there by the prime minister himself to ensure that the new opposition education minister didn’t go rogue.

Last but not least was Auntie Geok Peng as “something old”. After fifty years and several long-service awards, she had worked her way up to the position of head janitor. MOE had been her first job and, she hoped, her last job before her impending retirement. Her ability to blend into the furniture was unparalleled. Honed over years of faithful service, this superpower had allowed her to listen in on classified conversations levels above anything the average MOE bureaucrat could dream of. Auntie Geok Peng also always had a knack for being in the right place at the right time, an uncanny ability that countless civil servants could attest to. Many of them had found themselves trapped, on one occasion or another, with an empty toilet roll in an MOE toilet, helpless and embarrassed, until Auntie Geok Peng had come to the rescue with a fresh roll like a knight in janitorial slacks.

The conference room on the top floor of the MOE Buona Vista headquarters had ten seats. Today, only three were occupied. This had the effect of making the already large room seem positively cavernous. Li-Ann was seated at the head of the table, sandwiched between Maximilius Quek, whose scowl was already in place, and Carlsen Chiang, who was making himself busy replying to emails on his ancient BlackBerry, his brow furrowed in concentration.

The two men had made their animosity towards Li-Ann clear from her first day at the Ministry of Education six months earlier. Not openly, of course, but in the way that defiant children might

act out towards the arrival of an unwanted new stepmother they had not been consulted on. Quek, in particular, seemed affronted by her presence; even though their offices were on the same storey, she still had yet to share a lift with him. Li-Ann always told herself that she was just going to have to try harder to earn their respect.

Just then, Li-Ann caught the gaze of Auntie Geok Peng, who was quietly refilling the 3-in-1 coffee mix next to the machine in the opposite corner of the room. *Where did she come from?* Li-Ann wondered. Auntie Geok Peng gave her a small, encouraging smile, which lent Li-Ann the strength she needed to go through with her presentation.

Practising the deep-breathing exercises that she'd picked up from her daughter (who was a promising young debater), Li-Ann respired deeply, feeling her diaphragm rise and fall with each shaky breath.

She knew that she was as ready as she would ever be.

With the tap of a finger, Li-Ann dismissed the generic MOE screensaver in favour of the slides deck she had spent many sleepless nights preparing.

Li-Ann cleared her throat. Chiang and Quek looked up.

“Years ago, the principal of one of our secondary schools called attention to the fact that many elite secondary schools in Singapore are no longer truly representative of Singapore’s population. Studies on class stratification in local schools have pointed to the following trend: a disproportionate number of students from affluent, middle-class backgrounds in Integrated Programme and Gifted Education Programme schools compared to government-aided and government schools. Like it or not, our education system is no longer one where merit is the sole determinant of success.”

Li-Ann was gratified to see that Chiang had finally put away his phone.

She clicked to a slide filled with bar graphs and pie charts. Chiang and Quek frowned in unison. Well, Li-Ann thought, at least that proved they were listening. She was going to count that as a win.

“We should also be concerned that segregating students based on their academic ability from a young age leads to increased insularity and decreases social mixing. If two groups of students come to have fundamentally different life experiences, this could lead to a mutual lack of understanding in later years.”

It was how they had arrived at the current predicament of public dissatisfaction over elitism and social stratification. In her previous role, Li-Ann had noted the deepening divisions between the elite and neighbourhood schools with interest and alarm. She had mulled over how other well-intentioned educational policies might even be potentially exacerbating instead of reversing the trend.

She knew what Quek and Chiang would say. The so-called “elite” schools were already reaching out to promising Primary Six students in neighbourhood primary schools every year to stimulate diversity. The Direct School Admissions (DSA) scheme—which allowed students with exceptional talents in non-academic domains like sports, aesthetics or leadership to be admitted to elite schools, even if they might not have been able to qualify based on grades—increased academic diversity in those top schools. The schools and the media had been directed to de-emphasise the number of Public Service Commission (PSC) scholars and Oxbridge or Ivy League students the top schools produced each year, and to instead focus on the stories of students who had overcome adversity to reach their present position.

But how effective had all these efforts actually been? To Li-Ann, they seemed targeted at changing the public perception

that the elite schools were elitist, rather than actually addressing the root of the problem.

Instead, to Li-Ann, the solution was obvious. It wasn't the fault of the students themselves. It was human nature to stick with what was familiar and shun what was alien. At present, the education system simply did not give students enough opportunities or incentives to interact with people of a different background for a long enough period to form sound judgements about each other. And, in the absence of information, stereotypes about the "other side" abounded.

Every school, a good school: one of her predecessors had coined the phrase, only to face vitriolic public backlash for being disingenuous and out of touch. How could he have presumed to tell people what to think, how to think, despite the evidence before their eyes? How could he pretend that all schools in Singapore were equal, when the truth was that he and others in power discriminated between schools themselves: there were only certain local schools they would send their own kids to, and they would rather send them to international schools than to the others.

Li-Ann had felt that perhaps the public had been a little uncharitable to that poor predecessor of hers. Perhaps he had only meant that as long as a school met the needs of its students, it should be considered a good school.

According to the Ministry of Education, a good school was one that met the needs of a child and sought to bring out the best in him or her. Good schools cared for their students, ensured that students acquired a firm foundation in literacy and numeracy, and created positive learning experiences that prepared their students for a lifetime of learning. Good schools had caring and competent teachers who made an impact on their students' lives. Good schools

mobilised the support of the community and parents to bring out the best in each child. And a good school cared for and provided opportunities to *all* students, no matter their family circumstances. All of this was regardless of whether the school was popular or unpopular, branded or not.

Li-Ann had no doubt that Singapore's public education system was world class. Unfortunately, prestige was very much a matter of public perception. And over time, as impressions amassed through word of mouth, perceptions could easily influence reality and give rise to the truth. Perceptions that certain schools were bad, and certain students were hopeless, became horrible self-fulfilling prophecies that perpetuated themselves over generations, fuelling class divisions.

So there had to be more opportunities for students from elite and neighbourhood schools to interact on equal terms and understand each other better. To learn how to interact with one another and discover that the other side was not as lazy, or as arrogant, or as hopelessly immutable as they had thought.

"What do you suggest, then?" Quek scoffed, folding his arms. "Surely, after pontificating so much on the problem, you must have a solution? Or is this all just mere armchair talk from the Philosophers' Power Party?"

"Unfortunately, there is no magical silver bullet," admitted Li-Ann, gritting her teeth as she chose to ignore his immature jibe at her party. "However, I think that our society needs to be able to talk openly about equality and social stratification, and before we can do that, we need—as I've explained before—more opportunities for students from elite schools and neighbourhood schools to interact on equal terms and understand each other's school experiences better."

Pointing to her slides, Li-Ann outlined her plan briefly.

It worked on a similar principle as the overseas exchange programmes that students at elite schools often went on, to schools in countries like Japan, Taiwan and Germany. But instead of going overseas to learn about other cultures, fifteen-year-old Secondary Three students from neighbourhood and elite schools would exchange places for one term each year.

It was a very rough plan, and it would be unrealistic to expect to reverse decades of entrenched policies in an instant. But she believed it would, at the very least, lend the policymakers at MOE some insight into what was wrong and teach them how to fix it.

Unfortunately, she was dealing with a tough crowd.

“This programme is redundant and a waste of time,” blustered Quek. “I honestly doubt that the differences between these two types of secondary schools are distinct enough to merit an entire exchange programme.”

“Well, we won’t know for sure until we test it out,” said Li-Ann defensively. “That’s why I’m proposing we run a pilot test first and analyse the students’ reflections before deciding whether or not to go through with it. We’ll start with just two students from two different schools. I’ve already contacted the principals of Jurong Spring Secondary School and Stamford Girls’ School.”

“Okay, but even if the principals agree, what about the parents and students? How are you going to find guinea pigs willing to participate in this social experiment of yours?” retorted Quek. “Because what you’re suggesting is highly disruptive. The students would be missing out on an entire term of lesson time! What parent would volunteer their child for this?”

But Li-Ann had anticipated this.

So she was smiling as she clicked to the next slide. It featured a

photo of a beaming girl in a blue pinafore holding up a large gold trophy: Li-Ann’s daughter, Rowena.

“Well, *this* parent would.”

and Luke Wong, with whom I first discussed the premise of this book one day over lunch. Thank you to Eileen Wong and Wang Ziqian, whose experiences at school inspired the setting of my book. Thank you to the friends, both old and new, who have read my manuscript at various stages of incompleteness—Darren Chen (again), Deborah Lee, Jessica Jillella, Jeremy Lee, Shaun Song, Sophia He, Wang Ziqian (again), Xavier Lien and anyone else whom I might have forgotten due to my terrible memory. Thank you to Chloe Toh and Giovanna Wong, seasoned YA lit readers, to whom I was too embarrassed to show my drafts; I hope you enjoy the final product! Thank you to every wonderful English teacher I have ever had (especially you, Mrs Janice Low!). Thank you to Rao Ting, my very first beta reader.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ng Ziqin is an undergraduate law student at the National University of Singapore. Her writing has been featured in *RICE* and *Asia Law Network*. In 2020, she placed third in a youth op-ed competition with her piece, “We Need to Stop Promoting Science as the Default JC Stream.” Her biggest literary heroes are Terry Pratchett and Adrian Tan, and she has a growing taste for mystery novels and psychological thrillers. One day, Ziqin hopes to achieve her lifelong dream of retiring in a cave house, where she will write whodunits that take place in Yishun. *Every School a Good School* is her first novel.

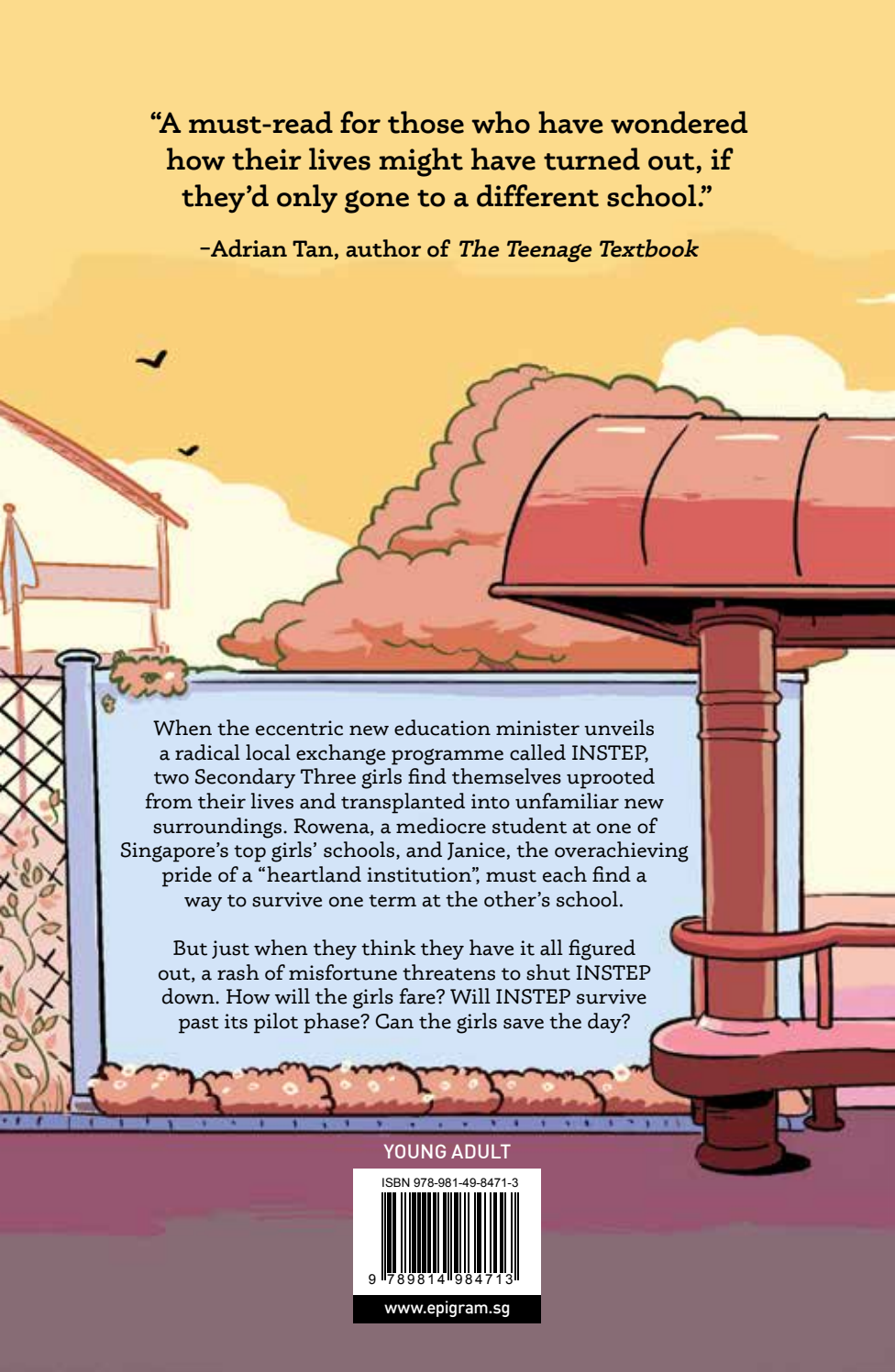


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“A must-read for those who have wondered how their lives might have turned out, if they’d only gone to a different school.”

-Adrian Tan, author of *The Teenage Textbook*



When the eccentric new education minister unveils a radical local exchange programme called INSTEP, two Secondary Three girls find themselves uprooted from their lives and transplanted into unfamiliar new surroundings. Rowena, a mediocre student at one of Singapore’s top girls’ schools, and Janice, the overachieving pride of a “heartland institution”, must each find a way to survive one term at the other’s school.

But just when they think they have it all figured out, a rash of misfortune threatens to shut INSTEP down. How will the girls fare? Will INSTEP survive past its pilot phase? Can the girls save the day?

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