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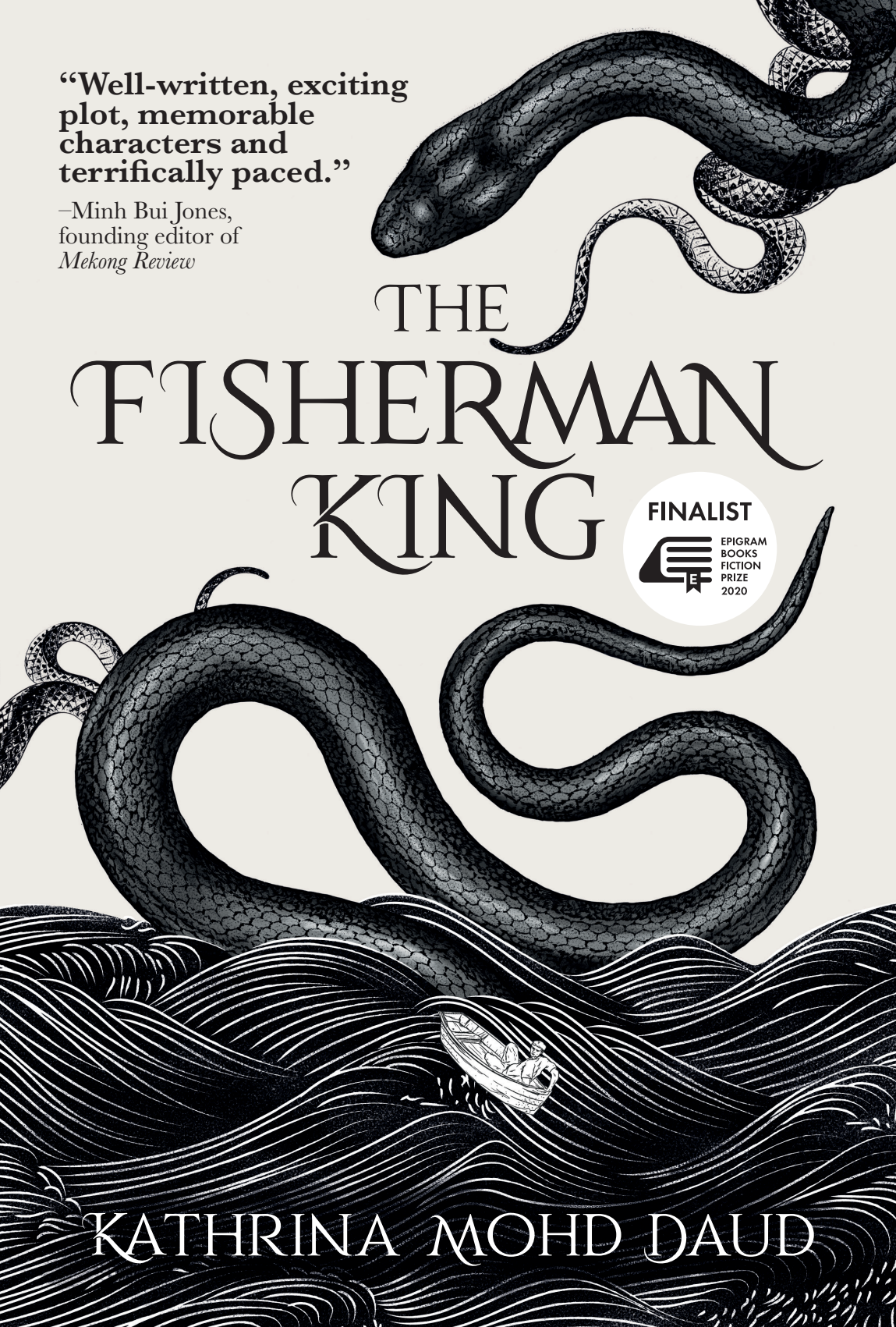
# THE FISHERMAN KING

FINALIST



EPIGRAM  
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PRIZE  
2020

KATHRINA MOHD DAUD



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characters and terrifically paced.”

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“A fast-paced caper of a folk tale that dives, quite  
literally, into the ocean of the self in search of  
treasure and the meaning of genealogy; an ocean with  
unexpected monsters and life-altering revelations.”

–CYRIL WONG, Singapore Literature Prize-winning  
author of *This Side of Heaven*

THE  
FISHERMAN  
KING

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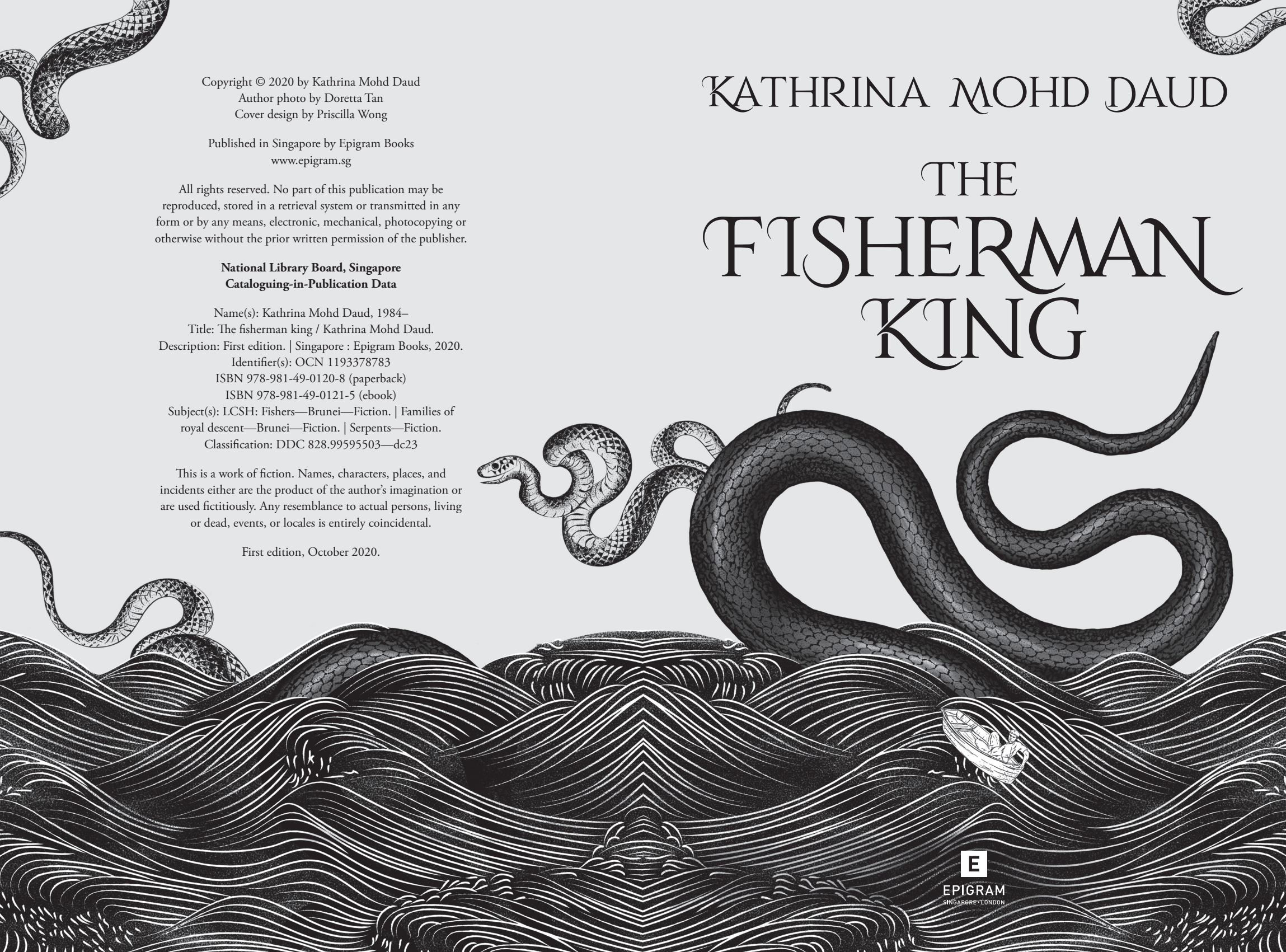
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KATHRINA MOHD DAUD

THE  
FISHERMAN  
KING



**E**  
EPIGRAM  
SINGAPORE · LONDON

*For Sophia,  
Aria Rashida  
and  
Layla Ariana*

*A story, with lots of aunty love*



# ONE

## MONSOON

**T**he crown prince is bored.

*“Tell me a story,” he says to the old woman who sits placidly at his head, chewing betel nut and fanning him slowly. They are alone in the long, shady room overlooking the river. It is a still day. The water shimmers languidly, but does not shift. The sky is an endless stretch of open blue, the clouds faraway and white. There is a sudden movement in the dense mangrove trees that line the riverbanks across the water. A bird shoots out, too distant to identify.*

*Kawang Achoi spits into a silver pot and continues to fan him. Her greying black hair is combed neatly back into a bun, her old skin liquid soft with creases. She looks unperturbed by the stifling heat, the everlastingness of the hot, calm afternoon. There is a comfortable weight in the air—it is the kind of afternoon that feels as if now is all there is, and there has never been any past and there will never be any future.*

*“What kind of story?”*

*The crown prince stretches restlessly. “Something true,” he says. “Something with magic in it.”*

*The fan goes on, unceasing, mechanical. “Not magic,” Kawang Achoi says. “But still true. I will tell you the story of Baktin and Sati. Have you heard this story before?”*

*“You know I haven’t,” the crown prince says petulantly. The heat is making him irritable, and impatient with Kawang Achoi’s teasing gambit.*

*Kawang Achoi ignores his bad temper.*

*“Baktin and Sati were brother and sister, the only son and daughter of a king. They were idle and indulged—this is never good, and it was not good for them. When they were young, they displayed the usual vices of the rich—impatience, greed, careless cruelty. They were allowed to go their own way because the king, a driven and ambitious ruler, was preoccupied with the kingdom, with expanding it, anxious to propagate his religion, the religion of his people.*

*“It cannot be said that the king was anything other than moral—he was almost fanatical about his piety, his God. The stories tell us that he was always so, a man who sought the truth and was not afraid of finding it. There are some who say that after the death of his wife—when Baktin and Sati were still too young to even say the word “mother” yet—he became even more religious, as if the only way he could accept her death was to cling even more tightly to a belief in divine justice, to the holy transience of life. Whatever the truth, all the stories report of the king’s strict and unwavering beliefs.*

*“But more often than can be believed—so often that it is surprising people do not take greater heed—the most moral, the most religious exempt their own families in the quest to establish a kingdom of heaven on earth. Whether the king indulged Baktin and Sati out of excessive*

*love, or was blind to their faults due to neglect, the whispers about them began early.*

*“You know, and I know, that there will always be whispers about those in positions of privilege. But from the very beginning, some of the whispers took on a darker tone. Baktin was rumoured to have an affinity for reptiles, and would always have a few pet snakes slithering around his bedroom. There was one courtier who was forced to endure an audience with Baktin while a python wrapped itself around the courtier’s legs and a viper coiled around Baktin’s wrist. The courtier said that the viper bit Baktin repeatedly on the wrist, drawing drops of blood, and Baktin simply laughed. He was a bit like a snake himself, we are told, long and handsome and graceful, with dark, dark eyes.*

*“The words that whirled about Sati were of a different nature. She had been promiscuous since she entered into adulthood—this, too, we know is normal. She delighted in having reluctant lovers, would stroll through the villages to pick out married men. She would go down, unclothed, to bathe in the river, and have punished all the men she passed on the way—those who saw her naked body for daring to look upon it, and those who lowered their gaze for daring to look away.*

*“But perhaps the darkest story about them was never pieced together. Knowing what we do about the end of their lives, we can begin to guess, to string together the pieces with meaning. They were said to take a boat and two servants, and disappear into the jungle for hours at a time, sometimes days, if their father was away, bringing nothing with them. Sometimes the servants would come back with them, sometimes they would not. The siblings carried a strange scent with them—incense and smoked orchids, even though no incense was permitted on palace grounds. Baktin spoke to his snakes, and Sati often visited villagers on their deathbeds, weaving*

her way across the waterways, although her particular joy was to visit the women as they gave birth. She would stand shrouded in the corner and watch as the women screamed and sweated, and all you could see of her were her eyes.

“Perhaps if the courtiers had brought these matters to the king, he would have stopped it, and this story would have ended very differently, for we can be sure now, as then, that he would have been horrified. But none of them did, until it was too late. Out of fear, or out of self-preservation, who knows. But it remains that the community stayed silent while Baktin and Sati did what they did, and that has never boded well. It was the king himself, who, coming one morning to greet his son, found his children in bed together.”

Kawang Achoi’s voice goes relentlessly on, but the crown prince can no longer hear it. He has been swallowed into the story, and he can see and hear the throne room into which the two royal children have been dragged. More than that, he can feel the overwhelming grief and confusion which the king is feeling. He is the king, the crown prince realises, looking out through weary eyes that are not his own, settled somewhere in the king’s skin.

The throne room is a simple affair—a round, wooden room. Above them, leaves arch in a canopy beneath the latticed wooden roof, so thickly interwoven that even when it rains not a drop gets through, and in the monsoon season, it rains often. Outside, the waves are gently rocking. The crown prince sees that the water is the same unchanging dark green it has always been. The room is decorated spartanly, cleansed and purified of idols and carvings. The only embellishment is from the arched shape of the windows, the geometric floral pattern of the floor. The throne itself, which the king sits on, is simply a large chair in a room of pillows.

The crown prince sees the two children as the king does, with clarified and new eyes. Baktin, my beloved Baktin, the king is thinking, with beautiful large eyes that are his legacy from his dead mother, and Sati, who has the thick long hair and honey curved limbs of the king’s own ancestors. How beautiful they are, standing there, and how alike, after all, in the end.

Throw yourselves down and beg for mercy, the king implores them in his heart. Then might I know that you repent—I need you to repent.

But Baktin and Sati stand together, heads thrown back defiantly. A small black snake curves itself around Baktin’s calf, and carelessly he stoops to pick it up and drape it around his long, lithe neck. The king shudders a little, and Baktin’s eyes come up to meet his. For a moment the king could swear that he sees a demon looking back out at him, and not his one and only son.

The moment passes, and he must assume the mantle of not only a father, but a king.

“Who here knew of this unholy union?” the king asks quietly.

Forty courtiers confess, or are identified. They step forward, trembling, standing just behind the two lovers.

“You shall be punished with them,” the king says.

One courtier, a bold, angry man, dares to protest, and the king silences him. “To know of a wrong and do nothing to prevent it is to bear responsibility. You shall be punished with them.”

“What is our punishment?” Sati asks.

The room is empty save for those being punished, and his own close advisors, but the king knows what must be done, knows that no leniency can be allowed even in these secret quarters. “The punishment for unlawful relations is death,” he says, “and you know this, daughter.” The



king emphasises “daughter” in a voice that is strong and unyielding, but his hands are cold, and his heart is weakening.

“We have had none but each other,” Sati murmurs.

“We are your children,” Baktin says softly. “You must have mercy.”

“It is because you are my children that I can have no mercy,” the king replies. “I would not have one law for the people and one law for you.

That is the way to idolatry.” Their eyes meet again. “You know this, son.”

No reply. All is quiet.

The king takes a deep breath. “You will build a room across the river,” he tells his advisors. “A room on land, for these forty courtiers and my children. Sink it underground, and give it a cooking hole with a fireplace. Stock it with provisions enough for forty days. That is your respite,” he tells his children. “You will have forty days to repent. We shall know you live by the smoke that comes from the cooking hole. On the day the cooking hole stops smoking, we shall know that your provisions have run out. You shall receive no more.”

“You are building us a grave,” Baktin says.

“You are burying us alive.”

The king nods. “I ask you to spend that time seeking forgiveness.”

Sati’s eyes glow a deep deep dark, and inside the king, the crown prince recoils. She seems barely human. “I am the future queen of this kingdom,” she says, and draws herself taller. “I seek forgiveness from no one.”

The king moves forward and grasps his daughter’s chin. He looks searchingly into her eyes, seemingly oblivious when Baktin’s snake climbs around her and onto his own forearm. The crown prince sees what the king sees, two oddly flat wells of brown, but cannot understand what makes the king suddenly thrust the princess away. “I see,” he says. The crown prince, inside the king, smells, confusedly,

incense and herbs and sees dangling from Sati’s smooth earlobes, two golden eagles.

The king turns away, slow and heavy. “This kingdom, on my death, moves to my brother,” he decrees. “Note it as my witnesses. From this day, neither my son nor my daughter is eligible to rule even if I should die during their imprisonment.”

Baktin hisses, and the king leaves the room, abrupt and undone. As the door closes behind the king, the crown prince slowly becomes aware of Kawang Achoi’s voice. “The room was built,” she says, “and the prince and princess sentenced to their deaths.”

The crown prince is quiet for a few moments, coming back to himself, his own limbs, his own skin. Kawang Achoi continues to fan him.

“How does such sin spread?” the crown prince asks. “Even under such a ruler?”

Kawang Achoi’s fan stops. The stillness of the air weighs down on them. “No one knows,” she says finally. “Were Baktin and Sati the beginning or the culmination? Were they allowed to do what they did because they were royalty, or did they do what they did because they saw it all around them? But I shall tell you two things that will help you. Firstly, despite all his attempts to expand his empire, the king had neglected the tribes in the forest. Secondly, one day they will dig up the grave of the prince and princess, and they will not find any bones.”

Another silence. A sudden noise from outside the room makes both of them look up sharply. The door opens and a chubby young boy tumbles inside, angry and smudged. “Muhsin!” the crown prince says. “What are you doing here?”

“He was listening at the door, Kawang,” the guard says, releasing the crown prince’s brother. He winks at Kawang Achoi, and disappears.

*Kawang Achoi tuts.*

*“I just wanted to hear the story,” Muhsin says bitterly. “You never tell me any stories! You only tell kekanda. And you teach him the secret languages and the—”*

*“Hush, hush,” Kawang Achoi says, gathering up the young prince into her comforting arms. “I tell him because he is to be king one day, and he must know these things, our history, if he is to rule wisely.”*

*Muhsin peeks up at Kawang Achoi, his face sulky. “I want to be king one day,” he says.*

*Kawang Achoi is shocked. “You mustn’t say that,” she scolds. “Saying that is like wishing something bad on your kekanda.”*

*The crown prince rises from his couch. “The stories are too grown up for you, Muhsin,” he says, striding to the window and inhaling deeply. “You are not ready for them. One day, Kawang Achoi will teach you.”*

*“She taught you when you were younger than me,” Muhsin protests.*

*The crown prince lets the wind wash his face before turning wearily back. “But I am to be king one day,” he repeats.*

*“Come,” Kawang Achoi says briskly. “Let us go and eat. You are hungry, that is why you are being like this. Come and I will give you something sweet.”*

*Muhsin’s face brightens, and he scrambles out of her lap, already sprinting to the kitchen. Kawang Achoi is about to follow him when she feels the crown prince touch her lightly on the shoulder. She turns, and finds herself looking up into his deep eyes. He looks so much like the first king, she thinks. Diluted, yes, over time, but something about the eyes, the turn of the chin...*

*“Is this a story of what has happened, or what will happen?” the crown prince asks, after a long and soundless moment.*

*She regards him with steady black eyes, her lips and teeth stained orange red with betel juice.*

*“My grandfather, or my grandson?” the crown prince presses.*

*Kawang Achoi chews one last time and turns to spit. The silver pot rings dully, densely, and the soon-to-be-king knows she will not answer. She says instead, “I have not told you the end of Baktin and Sati’s story.”*

He comes to them at the beginning of the monsoon season, and when the children first see him, he looks as if he is carrying a big net of fish—the light behind him, so he is all shadow. But as soon as he steps out of the light and onto their veranda, they are able to see that what they thought was a bundle of fish is just the shadow of other objects littered on the narrow walkway above the water, silhouetted with him.

He is tall, taller than the men they are used to seeing every day in the Water Village. It is not a virtue for a fisherman to be tall—it is easier to manoeuvre the rocking motion of the waves and to lift great buckets of flopping fish and the seawater that will keep them fresh until the moment they are laid on slabs of cold cement, tile and ice if you are built short and stocky, with your centre of gravity held close to the ground. Likewise, he is slim. Although his bones are substantial, the flesh covering them is scarce. But he has the dark, scorched complexion of the men of the Water Village, and he looks strong. He is dressed simply, in a short-sleeved white shirt and turned-up dark trousers that hide stain and damp, and he is barefoot.

He greets the children and seems unmoved by their curious eyes. He asks for their mother.

“Bu!” Param, the oldest boy, calls, without taking his gaze off this new stranger. “Someone is here for you.”

Their mother comes out, looking impatient, wiping her hands on her worn trousers. Her mouth drops open when she sees the tall man, and a hand, strong and sturdy, goes up to her mouth in a girlish gesture from her childhood. “Lisan!”

They hug, and the children’s avaricious eyes lap up every detail. When they draw apart, they see that their mother’s eyes are wet with laughing surprise. “What are you doing here?” she gasps out.

He smiles, a brief flashing smile that gleams white. “I decided I missed home, Mina,” he says lightly. He glances around. “It’s changed.”

Their mother follows Lisan’s—the children file away the name—gaze around the Water Village, taking in the new concrete houses perched on solid stilts that form new villages within the Village. “There was a big fire four years ago,” she says. “The government replaced the damaged ones with those new houses. We even have a proper sewage system now!”

Lisan follows her into the house, dark in mid-afternoon. When the sun moves down at dusk, the house will burst with golden orange rays that are absorbed into the wood, and at noon, there is nowhere to hide from the white sunlight. It is only now, at this time, that the house gains respite and the wood is allowed to set some of its warmth free, and settle into slumber.

The kitchen smells of frying fish, and their mother’s hands are stinging and stained with chilli seeds and soy sauce. Rice is being soaked in the cooker. Their mother has not strained the water yet—she uses it to wash her face and keep it smooth and young. Recently she has been showing Aisa, her oldest daughter, how to collect the

water and rub it over her face. The rice water is a natural exfoliant. Waste, Lisan thinks. There is little waste that is tolerated here in the Water Village.

Except for the biggest waste of all—and he thinks of shimmering jewels just under the water’s surface.

Something brushes against his leg, and he starts. It is a cat, tiger-striped in black and grey, with watchful green irises that, cat-like, are not friendly. “And who’s this?” he asks, softly, picking up the cat. It meows at him, warm and heavy.

“That’s Kuching,” Param says. He looks just like his mother at that age. Both he and the oldest girl are still watching from the veranda. “He’s our cat.”

“Of course,” Lisan says, keeping a straight face. He sets the cat down and it circles him once before padding over to Param, who gathers it onto his lap. Both cat and boy have identical looks of assessment on their faces.

“Have you come back for good?” Mina is asking him, as she shows him the house. It is the same as he remembers—the small dark rooms, the open windows framed by soft cotton tied sternly back as curtains. The smell of the Water Village has enveloped him since he got on the water taxi that brought him here. Fish, salt, the deep green-brown of the water. Everything about the Water Village is brown—the wooden stilts, the narrow walkways in between the close, cloistered houses, the never-still water, the people. That is why the new white houses are so jarring. They stand out too much, are too new. They don’t look as if they have grown out of the water, they look like they have been placed there by the hands of a confident man.

Mina shows him, proudly, the new bathroom, which is indeed a startling addition to the house, and a far cry from the hole in the planks that used to serve as their toilet. This bathroom is all pipes and tile—tile!—and a sink and a shower. Lisan turns on the tap and allows the tepid water to flow briefly.

“Maybe,” Lisan says vaguely. It doesn’t suit him to tell Mina everything just yet. His adopted sister knows him well, and doesn’t press.

“You’ll stay with us tonight?”

Lisan smiles. “Where else would I stay?” He wanders to a window in the children’s room and looks out. Mina’s house is on what is still the back edge of the Water Village—he has an unencumbered view of the shore, and can see dense green mangrove jungle lined all the way up to the horizon. He can almost hear the monkeys chattering. As well as the other sounds of the jungle. His heart leaps with excited impatience. He restrains himself. “If you’ll have me.”

“Don’t be silly,” Mina says, hurrying back out to the kitchen. “We’re glad to have you home.”

Dinner is a simple affair, and Lisan glories in it. It has been too long since he has had the fare of his childhood, and he had forgotten to hunger for it in his years away. The plain steamed rice, the fish fried golden and crisp, the tender white flesh underneath that needs only the barest touch of the soy sauce and chilli mix to burst with flavour. A bowl of green vegetables cooked with onions and tiny dried shrimp, and an icy jug of pale pink bandung.

Mina introduces him to the children as her brother, and they call him Uncle Lisan. She has had three of them so far—Aisa, Param and

a toddler called Baby by the rest of the family. Hanan, her husband, reacts to Lisan’s reappearance with faint surprise, which, with the normal stoicism of a fisherman used to the unpredictability of the seas, settles easily into acceptance.

“Where have you been all these years?” Hanan asks as they eat.

“Here and there,” Lisan says calmly. “All over the world, really.”

“What have you been doing?”

“Learning. Studying.” Lisan pauses. “Did you get my postcards?”

“You’re the one who sends the postcards!” Aisa breathes. She darts a look at her mother for confirmation.

“You did.” Lisan nods. “I wasn’t sure they’d arrive, with the postal service in Brunei being what I remember.”

“Some got rerouted,” Mina says. “To a place called Dar es Salaam. In Africa. But they made it here in the end. We never knew how to reach you, though.” His sister’s look is faintly reproachful.

“The places I went didn’t have postal service,” Lisan says by way of excusing himself. “But I knew how to reach you. And I was regular, wasn’t I?”

“One postcard every two months isn’t regular,” Mina sniffs. “And never a phone call.”

Lisan grins. “I forgot your phone number. Now then, Mina,” his tone is coaxing, “don’t be mad. I’m back now, and I won’t wander off like that again.”

“You’re staying for good then?” she persists.

Lisan shrugs. “Maybe. But if I leave, I’ll make sure you know how to reach me this time.”

She does not look satisfied with the answer, but Mina has always known how to choose her moments, and wisely stops

there. Not like someone else he knows, Lisan thinks, and that impatience and anticipation rise to the surface again. He has been holding himself back, carefully keeping himself in check, but it has been eight years, and not all of his hard-won patience is intact. “Does Bathia still live in the same place?” he asks with a feigned casualness.

He fools no one, he sees with some amusement. Both Hanan and Mina fix accusing eyes on him, although Mina’s hold some anxiety as well. They have both been waiting for him to ask. “She got married again, you know,” Mina says bluntly.

Lisan raises an eyebrow, even though he had in fact already known that. There is little about Bathia that he has not managed to keep abreast of. “Interesting,” he murmurs for his sister’s benefit. He rises to his feet. “But it doesn’t answer my question. Does she still live in the old house?”

Hanan and Mina exchange resigned glances. “Yes,” she says reluctantly.

Lisan smiles. “I believe I’ll take a walk tonight.”

“Can we come with you?” Param pipes up.

Lisan spares his new-found nephew a glance. “I don’t think so,” he says carelessly. “But I’ll be taking the boat out early tomorrow morning, if you and your sister want to join me. That is,” he says to Hanan, “if you have an extra boat you don’t mind lending me?”

“We still have your old boat,” Hanan says. “It’s tied downstairs. We’ve kept it in good order.”

Lisan is touched. “That was kind of you.”

“It’s your boat,” Hanan says simply.

Lisan nods. “So it is. Well, if you’ll excuse me.” He dances a faintly

amused gaze over his sister’s disapproving face. “I won’t be out too late,” he says with gentle mischief.

She scowls at him.

The night is dark here at the back edges of the Water Village. The lights from the north shore, the shore which holds the city, the fish market and the great golden mosque that is the pride of the country, do not glow here. The narrow wooden walkways are treacherous in the dark for one who does not know his way. The sound of the waves breaking relentlessly on the wooden stilts that hold everything up is enough, sometimes, to make a newcomer lose his balance, although the platforms themselves are perfectly still.

There are shades of blackness, even here. The jungle of the south shore is a perfect and complete black, against which the open sky is a lesser black. There are no stars tonight, and Lisan cannot even see his feet, relying on memory to take him where he wants to go.

He pads silently past quiet, dark houses. The lights are still on in some, and he takes care to walk on the opposite edge of the walkway, fading in the shadows. He knows his way well and his feet are sure and swift. The wooden grain under his feet is a texture that he only remembers now, and it still holds warmth from the day.

The house Lisan is looking for is half-hidden, like Mina’s at the back edge of the Water Village, nestled like a secret in a confusing and intricate junction of pathways. The houses here are squeezed closer together than around Mina’s. Window pressed to window. But they are also deserted, he notices now, and sees the remnants of charred and blackened wood. The fire Mina spoke of.

It is black here, but he knows where he is going.

The house is unlit. Lisan stands for a moment to let his eyes adjust, to let his pupils dilate in search of what light there is. He eyes the side of the house, and a grin comes to his lips. It has been a long time since he has tried it.

He crouches down next to the house and with one smooth swing, is underneath.

For a moment he thinks his grip will not hold, that he has forgotten where the beams are, and his heart thrums in a responsive thrill. He has fallen, twice before, into the black water below, when the eagerness of his youth had made him blind. He had had to climb like a monkey up the slippery stilts, and had hauled himself onto a walkway, soaking wet, only to look into Bathia's wicked laughing face. He had had to make the mistake only twice, to never make it again.

Now, hand to hand, feet searching out the crevices of the wood to gain footholds, and he is under Bathia's room within a minute. A boy, a man knocking on the floor will sound like the waves, will be drowned out by the water, unless you know what to listen for. It was a code they had had back when Bathia had been living with her strict father and nervous mother. But she had slept alone then, and he knows that she is not alone tonight.

Reckless, he knocks.

He can almost sense the moment she comes awake. It is as if they are sixteen again, closer than two vines. What moves one moves the other. He knocks again, and hauls himself from under the house to the window.

He is punched, hard, in the face.

Taken aback, he loses his grip and even experience cannot save him. He flails briefly and falls into the water.

When he manages to drag himself back up the stilts and onto the walkway, she is waiting for him on the front veranda. He supposes they are wearing identical expressions of annoyance.

“What did you do that for?” he complains.

Her eyes narrow into slits. The eight years have been good to her, he notes with an admiring gaze. No, that would be too passive of Bathia. She has grabbed the eight years and used them well. The promise of youth has been fully realised. She looks strong, womanly, thoroughly alive. And very annoyed. “I hope I broke your nose,” she says.

He touches it. “Sorry to disappoint.” He gestures at the house. “Can I come in?”

She doesn't budge. “I think my husband would object very strongly.”

He takes great pleasure in denying her the reaction that he knows she is expecting. “Come now, Bathia,” he says softly, smiling. “Does he know that you already have a husband?”

It is her turn to smile at him. “I divorced you five years ago,” she says, and there is malicious pleasure in her voice. “Abandonment is still a valid reason for a woman to seek divorce.”

That particular bit of news does jolt him, and before he knows it, his fists are tightening. He forces himself still. “You're lying.”

She has the temerity to laugh as she watches him. “You know I'm not.”

He is shaking her before he realises that he's moved. “How dare you?” he hisses. “How dare you?”

Quicker than a blink, amusement changes into hostility, and she is suddenly fighting him, scratching and biting. It takes all he has to drag her silently into the next house, kicking the door in to the empty living room. He doesn't care if anyone hears them, only he doesn't

want to be interrupted. He sets her down, and allows her to kick at him a bit more before saying firmly, "We're going to talk now."

She is watchful, shaking her hair out of her face. They circle each other like cats. "Why does that surprise you and not the other?" she demands. "How else do you think I could get married?"

He feels foolish, and angry. "I don't know," he mutters. "Bigamy?"

Bathia snarls wordlessly.

"Settle down," he says, talking to himself as well as her. "I'm back now."

She smiles. "You flatter yourself very much if you think that makes any kind of difference to me."

"It's good to see you again," he says, and it is. He is drinking her in, angry as she is. It has been too long. He is hungry for the sight of her. The missing of her has been an ache in his limbs for eight years. And his own anger does not dilute the pleasure, the settling of his bones now that they are together again. He chuckles. "I didn't expect you to have divorced me, but it doesn't matter. We can get married again soon enough. I expected the other. Trying to show me you'd moved on, Bathia? I know you too well for that."

She goes dangerously still. "You left me," she says coldly. "I told you when you did what would happen. I told you I would forget you."

"And yet you remember our old knock well enough to wake up at the sound," he says, soft and mocking. "You remember so well that you came to the window."

She bares her teeth. "Not the same welcome you were used to, though, was it, Lisan?" she says, just as soft. It is the first time she has said his name, and it runs like a shock through him. She starts to move past him. "I should be getting back to my husband."

He shakes his head vigorously to get the water out, and takes her arm as she nears, holding on as she tries to throw him off. "I'm your husband," he says coolly. "You would do well to remember that." He releases her. "I'm going to the cave tomorrow," he says to her back. "I'll come and pick you up at dawn."

She leaves saying nothing, but he knows she will be waiting for him the next day.

"What did he say when you left the house?" Lisan murmurs into Bathia's ear as he helps her onto the boat the next morning. Param and Aisa are watching wide-eyed.

She turns her head and he has to jerk back to avoid her sharp teeth. "He left an hour ago to go fishing," is all she says before she sits. She eyes Param and Aisa. "Who are these two?"

"My niece and nephew," Lisan says, taking a seat by the motor. "Aisa and Param." The motor is hot, a welcome heat. Hanan has taken good care of his boat—it is perhaps in even better shape than it was when he left it. It is painted a new blue and the ropes at the bottom are coiled neatly along with his fishing net. "This is your Aunty Bathia," he says, teasingly.

The children echo a hello. It is just after sunrise and the morning is cool. The sky is a grey-blue that turns lighter and lighter until it is a searing white, as he takes the boat smoothly out of the Water Village, along the south shore. It is silent except for the calling of the gulls and the constant rustling of the jungle. He nods at the package that he brought. "Eat your breakfast."

She unpacks the plastic bag and hands one of the brown packets



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I've been following the Epigram Books Fiction Prize and the publisher's mission for a while, and so in 2019, when it was announced that the prize was now open to writers from Southeast Asia, I was truly delighted.

I was excited to be longlisted, and happier still to be shortlisted—even moreso now that I've met the other finalists and know what important work they are doing in their writing, and what significant voices Epigram Books is giving a platform to. So, to Joshua Kam, Sunisa Manning and Erni Salleh, thank you for being a resource on writing Southeast Asia and living to right and re-write.

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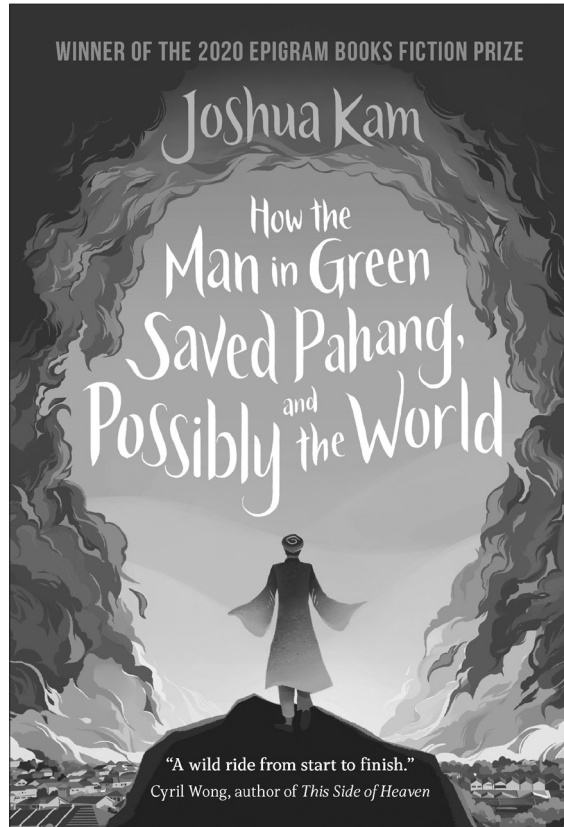




## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathrina Mohd Daud lives and writes in Brunei Darussalam. She holds a PhD in Writing from the University of Manchester, and is the author of *The Halfling King* and co-founder of the all-female Salted Egg Theatre group. She is bad with deadlines and proficient in daydreaming.

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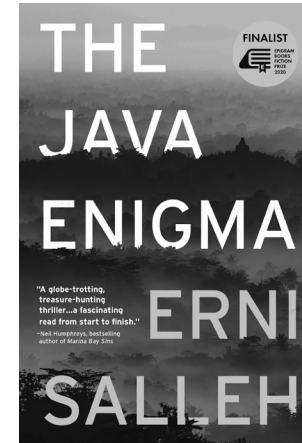


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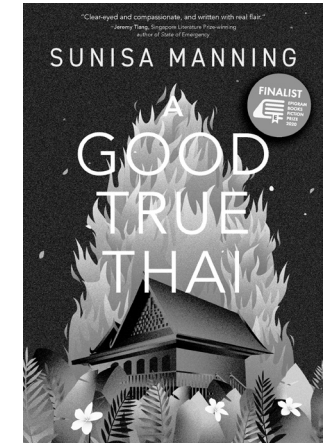
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Lisan the fisherman has always believed he was descended from Bruneian royalty, and now he says he can prove it. Returning to the Water Village after eight years, Lisan reconnects with his estranged wife Bathia to recover an underwater treasure that will establish his royal birthright. As the story of Lisan’s true intentions unravels, including what he was really doing in those years away, it becomes intertwined with the ancient history of two doomed royal siblings and a fearsome serpent god called the Nabau.



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