



FINALIST



EPIGRAM
BOOKS
FICTION
PRIZE
2023

GUS:

The Life and
Opinions of the
Last Raffles'
Banded Langur

Jon Gresham

“An anarchic romp through a post-apocalyptic, post-human Singapore, this is *Planet of the Apes* meets *The Walking Dead* meets *The Jungle Book*, featuring the nuttiest of characters on jaw-droppingly bloody escapades. A truly one-of-a-kind work of speculative fiction.”

—NG YI-SHENG, multi-award-winning author of *Lion City*

“This apocalyptic novel is about the unnervingly near future. What it tells is the riveting friendship between a talking langur and a human clown at the centre of a great revolution in Singapore and, for that matter, Nature. Jon Gresham’s chaotic Darwinian satire is funny and tragic and inserts a vast cast of attractive characters into memorable locales. An utter page-turner, *Gus* is the product of a magnificently troubling imagination that will scare its readers the next time they attempt a hiking trail.”

—GWEE LI SUI, poet, graphic artist and literary critic

“A traumatised monkey launches into a quest for home with the help of bewildered humans, in this narrative that never lets up from the very first page. Breathless, unrelenting, but also hilarious and unexpectedly poignant, here is a surreal and wildly entertaining morality tale about what happens when the natural world fulfils its vengeance on modern life as we know it.”

—CYRIL WONG, award-winning poet and author of *This Side of Heaven*

“An ecological dystopian romp, *Gus* is a warning about the delicate nature of the relationship between man and animal, and how fine the line of distinction can be as well. Gresham has written a zeitgeisty, absurdist tale that will entertain and make you think.”

—LEE JING-JING, author of *How We Disappeared*

“Gresham has written a thought-provoking and entertaining work that hurtles from escapade to escapade with humour and compassion. Activities like eating meat, visiting the zoo and reading news reports about the latest discoveries in the labs at Biopolis will probably leave one with some degree of disquiet after reading this book.”

—YEO WEI WEI, author of *These Foolish Things*

“A dive into a world at once familiar and unfamiliar. Singapore in the not-too-distant future, where primates have taken over, leaders have fled, and those left behind are forced to navigate a chaotic anarchic world that has stopped listening to nature. Through the eyes of the country’s last Raffles’ banded langur, we see these characters grappling with love, loss and the fine line between ‘us’ and ‘them’. An engaging read that stretches the imagination while it interrogates where we stand when faced with the fearful unknown.”

—PAMELA HO, former journalist and co-author of *Adventures of 2 Girls*

Copyright © 2024 by Jonathan Paul Gresham
Author photo by Rima Karima, all rights reserved. Used with permission.
Cover design by Priscilla Wong

Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigram.sg

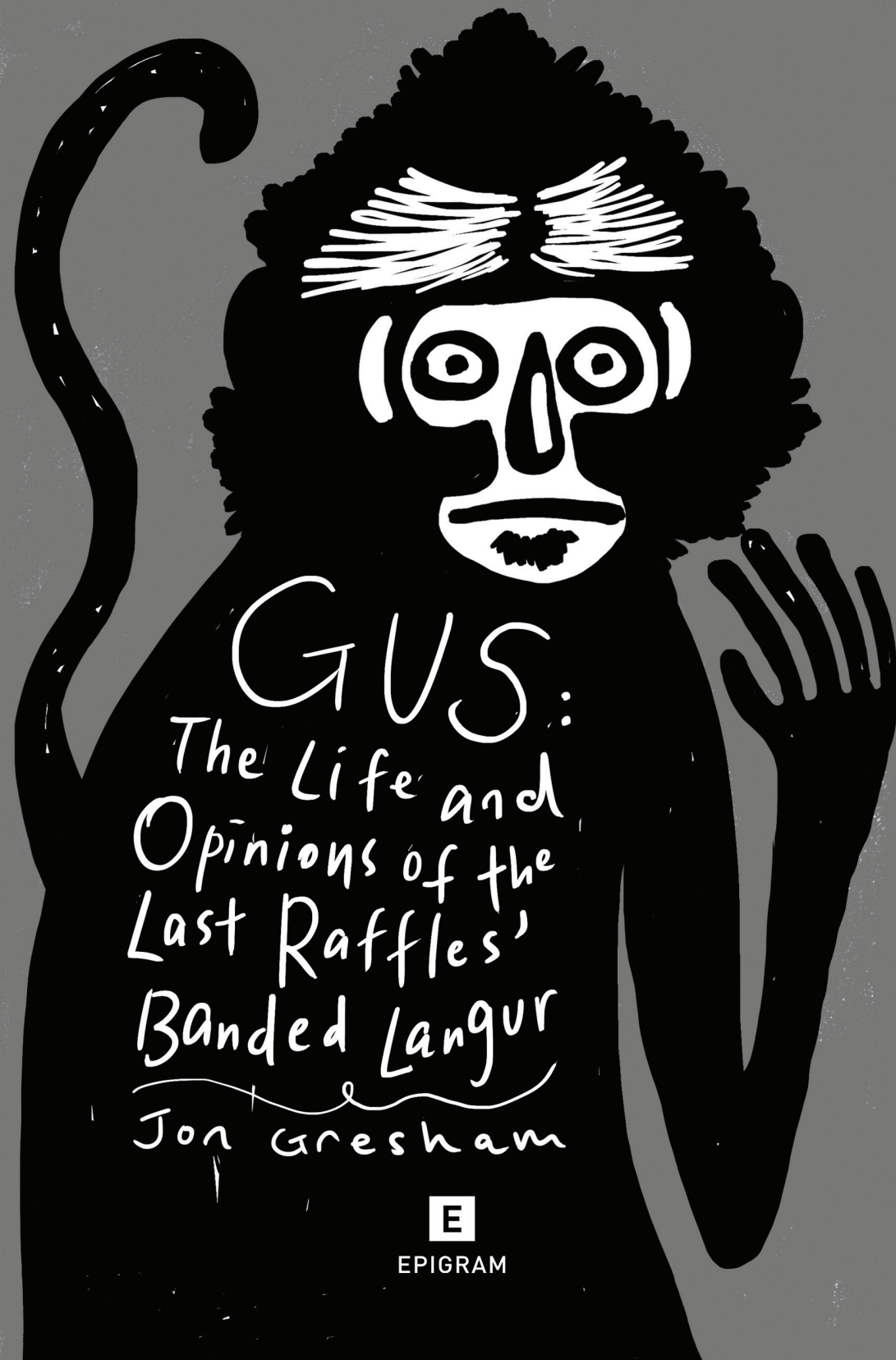
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher.

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Gresham, Jon, 1967–
Title: Gus : the life and opinions of the last Raffles' banded langur / Jon Gresham.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2024.
Identifier(s): ISBN 978-981-51-0532-2 (paperback)
ISBN 978-981-51-0533-9 (ebook)
Subject(s): LCSH: Presbytis—Fiction. | Monkeys—Fiction. | Singapore—Fiction.
Classification: DDC S823—dc23

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.

First edition, March 2024.



For Rima & Sophia

“Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.”

–OSCAR WILDE, *De Profundis*

“Home is not where you were born; home is where all your attempts to escape cease.”

–NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

PART ONE

DREAM OF CLOWN
DREAM OF BUKIT TIMAH
BALIK KAMPUNG

1

15 April 2026, TB Simatupang junction, Jakarta Selatan

THE NAME'S GUS. I am lotong cenekah, *Presbytis femoralis*.

I'm a smoky black, lesser spotted Raffles' banded langur, who once lived a torrid life as a topeng monyet, a street entertainer in Jakarta Selatan. Charlie Tan found me. Back then, I danced a jig on the saddle of a unicycle, my head encased in a plastic doll's head. Chained and enslaved. Dying inside. With only dreams of Bukit Timah to console me.

This is our story. The story of how I made Charlie Tan a clown and restored his gonads. An epic tale of freedom and failure, cannibalism and nursing care. Not just Charlie's and my tale, but a yarn told to me by people, animals, insects, birds and those in between.

But don't let me swing ahead of myself. Let me tell this tale leaf by leaf, with the utmost eye for truth and detail. Let's focus on Charlie in a hire car—scooters, trucks and vans speeding by—stuck at the traffic lights. The lingering scent of stale cigarettes mingled with noxious vehicle fumes made him nauseous. He wished the driver would hurry. Tired Charlie heading home to Singapore—or at least trying to—after a month-long audit of the Indonesian subsidiary of the Singapore and Shenzen Pulp and Paper company. He'd be lucky to make his flight—the last one back to Singapore before they closed the borders.

Charlie hated his job and wished he had the balls to be a clown. He measured his days calculating conditional formulas in elaborate spreadsheets, while in his heart of hearts he longed to make people laugh. Emasculated by his employment, he detested being a numbers man, wading through reports, ticking and bashing. Every sad, sleepy hour after lunch, he banged his head

against the wall, lusting after jumbo-sized shoes and red noses. Not even a polystyrene container crammed with chicken rice consoled him. He didn't dare tell anyone of his clown dreams. His boss, Bruce Wang Wei, would scoff. His Pa would be contemptuous, shake his head, and scold, "Aiyoh! Goondu! Throw away career. Throw away life."

Charlie's hire car pulled up at the traffic light at the turn-off to the airport expressway, just past CITOS. My handler, Bapak Mokkel—a single-toothed, wrinkly man with a shock of greasy, grey hair—smacked his hand against the window, proffering a grimy palm. Charlie, jolted out of his reverie, shook his head and slumped back into the vinyl seat.

Bapak Mokkel jerked the heavy chain attached to the studded collar around my scrawny neck. He jabbed a dirty digit at me as I juggled three sweet bananas, hopping in time to the tinny sounds of the Panturas playing on a transistor radio lying in the dirt.

With my head entombed within the doll's head and only my amber eyes peering, and black lips poking, through ragged holes in the plastic, I recited eloquently from Pramoedya Ananta Toer in my articulate and elegant mid-Atlantic accent: "An educated person must learn to act justly, beginning, first with his thoughts, then later, show the nature of his soul, in his deeds."

I rode around the traffic light in furious circles. Charlie perked up at my performance. Signs of glee appeared. His tired face transformed. I balanced the bananas on my head and scooped up tiny cymbals, clanging in time to "You and Me Against the World". My God, I clowned as though my life depended on it. A wince and a pratfall. Charlie laughed.

Take a bow, you trickster, twirling gimp.

Thank you very much, through gritted teeth, yes sir, I will.

Bapak Mokkel held up his palm. Charlie peered past and our eyes met through the window. Later, he told me that, in his mind's eye, he saw himself as a toddler again. A fragment of another life: two kids playing in the sand beside the swings at Labrador Park. Except one wasn't a kid. One was a hairy young macaque with caramel and blue eyes, and a silly buck-toothed grin. Another monkey, not me. To Charlie, that idyllic image was no dream. This

memory, blocked and repressed for over two decades, had stuttered into the present. Another time in need of rescue.

Help me, I mouthed, peering through the eyeholes in the doll's head.

Bapak Mokkel yanked the chain so hard that I lurched into the dust. The bananas and the doll's head fell to the ground, and through the orange-hued haze, I met nerdy, pasty Charlie's gaze. Bapak Mokkel banged on the taxi window, urging Charlie to part with his money. Charlie frowned, cocooned inside the taxi, reluctant to lift a finger. He withdrew into himself.

Bapak Mokkel whipped the chain with a crack, jerking my neck. Enough. I held up my palms as though to surrender, then grabbed the chain and tugged back, snarling. He smacked me in the back of the head with such velocity that I spat blood onto the ground.

Peering inside Charlie's car, I spied a red-and-white luggage tag hanging from his laptop bag. The Singaporean flag. The place I once called home—before smugglers brutally stole me from my mother's arms and trafficked me across the Java Sea. Well, actually, I lie. I wasn't literally taken from my mother's arms. I climbed from the waters at Hindhede Quarry, drenched and bedraggled, only to be grabbed by the ankles and thrown into a green plastic garbage bag. They smuggled me to Bintan on a ferry across the savage sea, squashed between two pangolins, Mickey and Mindy, in a false-bottom golf bag. I have nightmares about that trip: the vast expanse of water, the bottomless sea. The slow, stomach-churning sway in the darkness. A driver up my arse. They sold me to a wildlife collector in Jakarta, who disliked me so much that he thrust me into the arms of his security guard as a Hari Raya bonus. He in turn traded me to Bapak Mokkel for a bag of prawn crackers. And that's how I ended up dancing and juggling from dawn to dusk at traffic lights in Jakarta Selatan.

Later, Charlie told me that he thought I was damn ugly—blotches of pink skin showing through filthy, matted fur. "My first instinct was to turn away. I had to catch a flight. You were scrawny and frail, but I asked myself: who was I and what was I for?"

I weighed about as much as a coconut. Heavier than a jungle fowl, but a

tad less than a bush pig. I only came up to his knees. He thought I resembled a long limbed, shrunken dwarf, with dirty white rings around amber, dinner-plate eyes, and an impish grin set in a pink face amid a lush flurry of dark fluff. He saw in me a reflection of himself. We both yearned for more. Who wouldn't rather be a monkey clown than an auditor?

I left the unicycle in the dirt and scrambled to Charlie's taxi. Reaching the limits of the chain, my neck snapped back.

Charlie bit his lip. His eyes softened. He wound down the taxi window and handed Bapak Mokkel a one-hundred-thousand-rupiah note, the equivalent of just over eight Singapore dollars. He frowned when Bapak Mokkel snatched the money, yanked my chain and dragged me through the dust.

The light changed to green, and Charlie, for once in his life, acted. He seized the chain from my handler's hand and beckoned to me. Bapak Mokkel tried to hold on and regain his grip. For a moment, my feet left the ground and my head felt as though it would leave my body. But then Charlie wrenched the chain away, and I was free.

I ran. I reached out, grasped Charlie's tender fingers. In among hybrids and scooters, Charlie took my hand, and I leapt through the taxi window onto his lap.

I shrieked with laughter.

"Just drive," Charlie said to the bewildered driver. "Drive!"

Charlie tore off my collar and threw it out the window.

"Don't worry, little buddy. I'll take care of you."

Did this mean I no longer needed to sleep in a locked cage? That I'd be eating more than a single yam a day? That I'd soon be leaping between albizias fifteen metres above the ground?

Through the rear window, Bapak Mokkel lay on the road shaking his fist. Panting, I calmed down, closed my eyes, slowed my breath and counted to ten. My body shook and I pressed the balls of my thumbs into my eyes. I beamed at Charlie and he chuckled.

"You poor little chap. What shall I call you?"

"Gus," I said.

“Goodness. You’re such a great performer.”

So soon, such joy? Plenty of regrets to come, that was for sure. It wouldn’t take Charlie much time to work out that I was smarter than him. In a few months, he would grow to hate my guts and rue the day he ever set eyes on me.

Still, I was free. And that was something. Free to return to Singapore, to get back to the green tops of trees, to try to find my troop, my home, my family at Bukit Timah. Balik kampung.

2

15 April 2026, Somewhere over the South China Sea, near the end of flight SQ8593 to Singapore

ON THE PLANE, crammed into the toilet compartment, perched upon the plastic seat, I asked Charlie, “Do you live near Bukit Timah?”

“Afraid not,” he replied, frantically removing more stuffing from the Komodo dragon plush toy he’d bought at Soekarno–Hatta International Airport.

“Can you take me there?”

“Sure, Gus. Be patient. Shhh. Get back inside the dragon. Not long now. We’re nearly there.”

I shook my head. This was my first time flying. The scent of airline soap drove me gila crazy. “I’m going to be sick.”

Someone banged on the door. “Are you done yet? Hurry up.”

The impatience of people.

Charlie gritted his teeth. “You have to get back inside right now.”

“No. I need air. It’s too hot. I need to scratch. Can’t I hide under your shirt? Pretend to be your beer gut?”

“Get real. If you’re discovered, they’ll shove you in a sack and drop you in a river.” He pushed me inside the plushie and flushed the stuffing down the toilet, drowning out my objections.

That day was a good day. A day of escape. Though we had just met, I trusted Charlie to get me into Singapore and help me find my long-lost family. Progress at last.

Obviously, this was before I had any inkling of the devious plans that

Charlie had for me. I possessed no knowledge of his views on clown. How could I? My exit happened in a whirl, without due diligence. So glad to be free of one cruel handler, how could I know that the next one's kindness would cause me far greater pain?

Carrying me within the soft toy, Charlie returned to his window seat as the pilot announced in calm, soothing tones, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. You'll be happy to hear that you're the fortunate few on this last flight into Singapore. Flights will be suspended while the authorities deal with primate problems. But that won't trouble us. We'll have you on the tarmac in a jiffy. Please fasten your seatbelts, adjust your tray tables and raise your window shutters. Take in the view through the clouds on your left, and you may catch a glimpse of the city lights, the Singapore Flyer and Marina Bay."

I couldn't believe that I was on my way home. I needed to see for myself. I stopped squirming on Charlie's lap, poked a teeny hole in the plushie's polyester fabric and edged towards the window. I couldn't spot the Flyer. Only fluffy grey clouds tinged with pink and orange. God, I loved these metal tube projectiles. I loved the canopy, and leaping from branch to branch among the treetops, but I was much higher than that in this plane. My mood turned when I saw the shadowy, cobalt-blue sea below, peppered by lights from tankers and freighters. Staring at the dark, unending sea made me queasy. Thalassophobia. A primal weakness. I hated the ocean and what lurked beneath. I felt giddy and I couldn't stop perspiring. I calmed myself with deep Ayurvedic breathing and whispered my mantra: "Ma'af, atas nama pengalaman. Sorry, in the name of experience."

Ten years before, my mother had tried to teach me to swim, when she tossed me from the cliff above Hindhede Quarry at Bukit Timah into the dank, faecal waters below. It was supposed to be a learning moment. The water cool and tranquil. In sweet excitement, I tumbled through the air, over and over, until I hit the fetid water and sank deep into darkness. Flailing. Wracked by fear. Unable to determine which way was up. A searing pain in my lungs. Only after letting go did I bob to the surface.

On the other side of Charlie sat a smiling middle-aged lady in a purple,

velour jumpsuit with an obtrusive bouffant hairdo. She had been in Bali on holiday, and had decided to take a shopping and cocktail detour to Orchard Road on her way back home. Her plane had been rerouted to Jakarta due to a mysterious, red dust, some form of fungi growing inside the engine. That's how she came to be sitting next to Charlie. Excluding Charlie and me, of all the people on that flight, the lady in purple survived the longest. A year later, while defending a barricade at Blair Road, she would narrowly avoid being impaled on a bamboo spear.

She asked Charlie, "That's a lovely lizard you've got there. For your child?"

Charlie nodded awkwardly.

I stifled a chuckle and tried not to wiggle. Her face so serious. She placed a hand on his forearm and whispered, "My name's Joyce. Joyce Lazaroo. I'm a homeopath. Have you heard what's happening?" Charlie shook his head. Of course, he knew, but he didn't want to talk. "About the monkeys? They're revolting."

"I'm kind of neutral about them," he quipped through clenched teeth.

"They're literally revolting. They're speaking out. Too good for the jungle. I never expected to see this in my lifetime. The government must sort this out."

"What do they want?"

"Everything."

I squirmed, struggling to control my outrage. Her comments should not go unchallenged. She needed to be put in her place, but Charlie pinched me through the Komodo, and I said nothing.

"Frankly, it's the fulfilment of prophecy," she said as she gripped his forearm. "It's a sign. A sign of the end. 'They shall speak in new tongues.' The Lord will return soon."

Charlie grimaced, and we both stayed silent as she lectured us about the end of the world.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt gratitude, admiration and respect is extended to the following:

Rima and Sophia, for feeding, tickling and putting up with me and my rantings about primates, idling vehicles, the climate crisis and jungles being chopped down. I love life with you two. Love you both until the end of time.

Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, for her blog on walking the Rail Corridor, which first piqued my interest in walking across Singapore many years ago. Thanks for her wise words and editorial input.

Gwee Li Sui, for his advice on Singlish, editorial input, good humour and enthusiasm for a small langur.

Lee Jing-Jing, Yeo Wei Wei, Pamela Ho, Cyril Wong and Ng Yi-Sheng, for their input, advice, encouragement and friendship.

Epigram Books and specifically publisher Edmund Wee, editor Jason Erik Lundberg and managing editor Priti Sharma, for helping to bring this book into the world.

Priscilla Wong, for a cover that captures Gus's mischief and sadness so well.

The judges of the 2023 Epigram Books Fiction Prize: Meira Chand, Carissa Foo, Peter Schoppert and Michelle Yeoh.

My writing group, for our friendship, get-togethers and encouragement: Arin Alycia Fong, Balli Kaur Jaswal, Barrie Sherwood, Gautam Joseph, Ng Yi-Sheng, Prasanthi Ram and Yuchen Hong.

Terence Szeto, wildlife photographer, for his beautiful images of wildlife in Singapore that grace my website, JonGresham.com, and social media.

The following books and texts were helpful to me in writing my novel:

Raffles' Banded Langur: The Elusive Monkey of Singapore and Malaysia by
Dr Andie Ang & Sabrina Jabbar (World Scientific, 2021)

The Animals in That Country by Laura Jean McKay (Scribe, 2020)
Fox 8 by George Saunders (Random House, 2013)
Elmer by Gerry Alanguilan (Epigram Books, 2020)
The Green Rail Corridor: A Biodiversity and Ecological Overview by Ho Hua Chew, Anuj Jain, Alan Owyong (Nature Society (Singapore), 2019)
“The Mower” from *Philip Larkin Poems: Selected by Martin Amis* by Philip Larkin (Faber and Faber, 2012)
“26 Monkeys, also the Abyss” by Kij Johnson, from *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, July 2008, reprinted in *Clarkesworld*, Issue 150, March 2019
“The Evolution of Trickster Stories Among the Dogs of North Park After the Change” by Kij Johnson from *The Coyote Road: Trickster Tales* ed. Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (Viking, 2007)
Elizabeth Costello by JM Coetzee (Vintage, 2004)

I also acknowledge the work of and quotations from the wonderful Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer from the following books:

This Earth of Mankind by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (translated by Max Lane) (Penguin Books, 1996)
Exile: In Conversation with Andre Vltchek and Rossie Indira by Andre Vltchek and Rossie Indira (Haymarket Books, 2006)

Juliette’s vision in Part 4, Chapter 3 is based on Michelle Chong’s essay on macaques in *Eating Chilli Crab in the Anthropocene* (Ethos Books, June 2020)

The phrase “Exterminate all the brutes!” quoted by the Monkey King in Part 4, Chapter 9 is from *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

Gus’s reflection on the Monkey King’s judgement in Part 6, Chapter 4 is inspired by, and a paraphrase of, Roy Batty’s speech in *Blade Runner*, 1982, directed by Ridley Scott, Warner Brothers. Gus’s invitation in Part 2, Chapter 13 is from *The Terminator* movies. There are also various nods to Monty Python, Douglas Adams and eighties pop-culture references woven into the text.

In Part 6, Chapter 11 of the novel, an excerpt from “Ulysses by the Merlion” by Edwin Thumboo (Heinemann Educational Books, 1979) is paraphrased and reinterpreted by Khun Manohara.

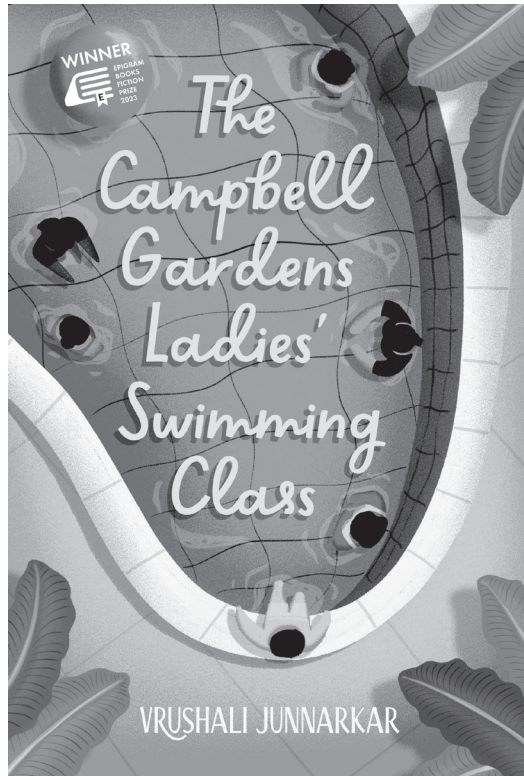


About the Author

Jon Gresham is the author of *We Rose Up Slowly* (2015). His writing has appeared in various publications including *Best Singaporean Short Stories 1* (2020) and *The Best Asian Short Stories 2020*. His story “The Visit” was shortlisted for the 2020 Short Fiction/Essex University Prize and included in *Best New Singaporean Short Stories: Volume Five* (2021). He also co-edited *In This Desert, There Were Seeds* (2019), an anthology of stories by West Australian and Singaporean writers.

Jon helped run the Asia Creative Writing Programme, a collaboration between the School of Humanities at Nanyang Technological University and the National Arts Council of Singapore. He is a co-founder of Sing Lit Station, and established the Book A Writer workshop programme. He has lived in Singapore for over twenty years. *Gus: The Life & Opinions of the Last Raffles’ Banded Langur* is his first novel.

WINNER OF THE 2023 EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

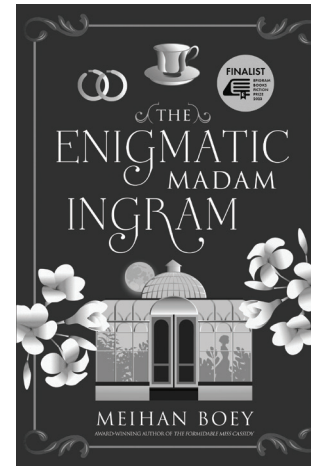


THE CAMPBELL GARDENS LADIES' SWIMMING CLASS
VRUSHALI JUNNARKAR

An eclectic group of Indian women living in a Singaporean condominium are determined to learn how to swim. Suchi, Nayanika, Latha, Radhika and the others will need to grapple with body image issues and conservative values in order to accomplish their goal.

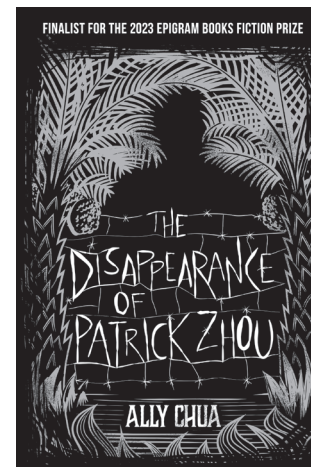
As they struggle then glide through the clear water of the condo's swimming pool, they will paddle against the tide of ingrained beliefs, tread carefully past family expectations, and dive deep into their own psyches to let go of things held dear.

FINALISTS FOR THE 2023 EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE



THE ENIGMATIC MADAM INGRAM
MEIHAN BOEY

In this exciting sequel to the multi-award-winning novel, *The Formidable Miss Cassidy*, Letty Ingram, a half-Malayan lady raised in the UK, has suffered under a strange curse her whole life. Her beautiful and fearsome mother, from an unknown island in the Malay Archipelago, is the key to the mystery. Letty arrives in Singapore in 1906 to seek the help of the Chinese medium, Madam Kay. But Madam Kay's whole family gets involved, including her sister, her father...and their unusual mutual friend, the formidable Miss Cassidy.



THE DISAPPEARANCE OF PATRICK ZHOU
ALLY CHUA

The Zhou-Guthrie company is a powerful one, with an oil palm fortune built on the suffering of others. One night, Patrick Zhou, the charismatic heir to the business, disappears en route to a conference, never to be seen again.

Fifteen years later, Zhou-Guthrie is a failing dynasty. The matriarch, Doris Zhou, is on her deathbed. In her last lucid moments, Doris tasks her granddaughter, Layla, with finding out what happened to Patrick. To solve this disappearance, Layla will uncover corporate espionage, environmental crimes and family secrets—perhaps intimately connected to the ghost stories Uncle Patrick told her years ago.



The annual Epigram Books Fiction Prize promotes contemporary creative writing and rewards excellence in Southeast Asian literature. It is awarded to the best manuscript of a full-length, original and unpublished novel. Originally restricted to Singaporean citizens, permanent residents and Singapore-born writers, the EBFP is now open to all of Southeast Asia for novels written in or translated into the English language.

For more information, go to **EBFP.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG**



**FINALIST FOR THE
2023 EPIGRAM BOOKS
FICTION PRIZE**

*“A truly one-of-a-kind
work of speculative
fiction.”*

—Ng Yi-Sheng, multi-award-winning
author of *Lion City*

*In this action-packed
eco-novel, wild talking monkeys
lead a revolution in a troubled
Singapore. Gus, a precocious Raffles'
banded langur, seeks to get home
to Bukit Timah Nature Reserve,
a Filipino nurse tries to heal her
grief, and an auditor strives to be a
clown. Their adventures take place
along the Rail Corridor, among
the shophouses of Blair
Plain, and beneath the
skyscrapers of
downtown Singapore.*

FICTION

ISBN 978-981-51-0532-2



9 789815 105322

www.epigram.sg