

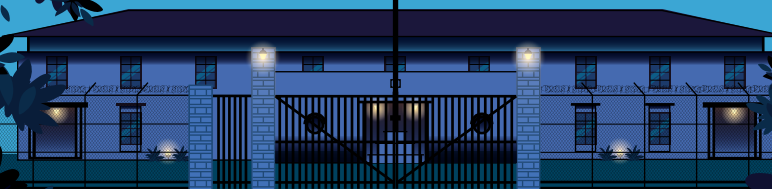
LONGLISTED FOR THE 2022
EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

GARDENS

AT

PHOENIX

PARK



WONG SOUK YEE

AUTHOR OF *DEATH OF A PERM SEC*

“Wong Souk Yee stirs this cauldron of a tale filled to the brim with political intrigue, and brings it to boil with such precision and realism that one ought to be forgiven for mistaking it as a memoir of a political detainee who has undergone a similar ordeal. Riveting!”

–Sebastian Sim, award-winning author of
And the Award Goes to Sally Bong!

“This is the intimate story of three idealistic young people interwoven with the history of a parallel Singapore. The personalities and events seem very familiar. However, there are twists and turns as counterfactuals emerge to surprise the reader just when they think they know what will happen next. Wong’s mastery as a storyteller is also evident in the details, especially the soul-crushing nature of detention without trial and the complex yet completely relatable characters. A very good read.”

–Prof Paul Tambyah, Chairman of the
Singapore Democratic Party and President of the
International Society for Infectious Diseases

Copyright © 2023 by Wong Souk Yee
Author photo by Patrick Poon. Used with permission.
Cover design by Priscilla Wong

Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigram.sg

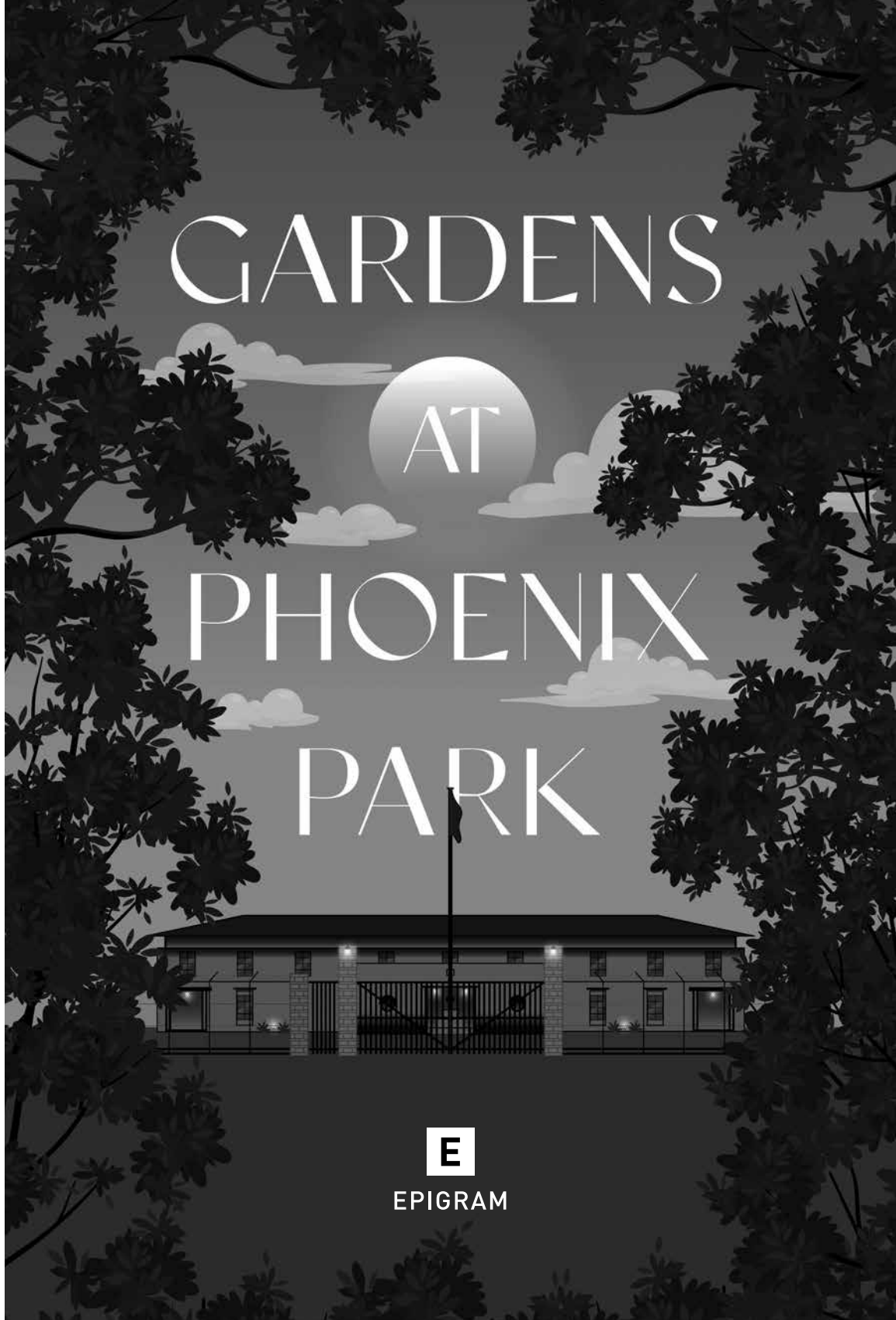
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher.

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Wong, Souk Yee, 1958–
Title: Gardens at Phoenix Park / Wong Souk Yee.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2023.
Identifier(s): ISBN 978-981-5105-06-3 (paperback) | 978-981-5105-07-0 (ebook)
Subject(s): LCSH: Friendship—Fiction. | Government, Resistance to—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, July 2023.



GARDENS AT PHOENIX PARK

E
EPIGRAM

In memory of Suporn Arriwong, my fiercest critic and dearest friend

BOOK ONE
1977–1991



PART ONE

Min Chan

Chapter 1 – University of Singapore, 1977

WE WERE TOLD to wait at the car park outside the headquarters of the Factory Workers' Union, a factory building in Jurong Industrial Estate. Just the previous week at the Jurong Bus Depot, I'd joined a couple hundred retrenched workers and university students to protest against the union chief, Pey, for once again selling out the interests of the workers.

"Eunuch, kayu! Eunuch, kayu!" we'd shouted. I had never felt more alive chanting about the anatomical impotence of the workers' union boss, and each pumping of my fist in the air had infused a sense of purpose into my erstwhile aimless life.

Pey was just any other union mafia boss propped up by the cosy tripartite relations among employers, trade unions and the state. Thus, he'd taken such public humiliations of his manhood personally. He must have seen us as some screaming Red Guard of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, shaming him in a recantation parade. He could not help curling his lips, which had torn through the mask of his usual deadpan face, when Swee Heng, our students' union president, had asked him which side he was on.

With swollen veins, he'd sworn, "I'll put you in your place."

The security guard let Swee Heng and three workers enter the ground floor of the factory building, while the ten of us remaining, consisting of a small group from the Depot protest, milled around in the car park. Pey had got us there with the promise of working out a retrenchment benefit package with the students and workers. Through the tinted glass window, I could see a clerk at the front office indicating for them to wait there. The clerk then locked the main entrance door, supposedly to prevent us from entering, before disappearing into the back office. Swee Heng looked back at us through the window and gave us an overcompensating smile.

Upstairs and all around us, the train of industry chugged along like the dull throbbing of a migraine headache. In the distance, chimney stacks belched out thick black smoke. The country's economy had been battered by the international financial collapse that year, fuelled by the oil crisis. The Factory Workers' Union was run by government-appointed officials whose primary responsibility was to ensure the good behaviour of its members and harmonious relations with management and government. Pey would often boast that he had to break his back, but more likely other people's, to maintain industrial harmony.

After nearly twenty minutes, there was still no sign of Pey coming out to meet the negotiators, and even the clerk who had first greeted them was nowhere to be seen. I would not have been the least surprised if Pey reneged on his promise. Swee Heng and the workers were left pacing in the reception area. Then from the vicinity of the back office came the loud crash of glass shattering. Swee Heng and the three workers hastened through the hallway to where the noise was coming from, and then were out of our sight.

Before I even had time to think, I heard police sirens heading towards the building, followed by a patrol car and an anti-riot vehicle, commonly called the Ang Chia (or "red vehicle" in Hokkien), trundling down the

road into the car park where we were waiting. The Ang Chia disgorged troopers armed to the teeth. Cold sweat trickled down my spine and my knees went weak. The other protesters and I looked at each other, expecting the worst. I had not anticipated that my second year in university would see me arrested by riot police.

Then, through the tinted glass window, I saw the clerk dart out from the back office and unlock the main entrance door, swinging it open right on cue to let in the truncheon-wielding riot police, who stomped straight to the back office. Before long, to my horror, I saw Swee Heng and the three workers being frogmarched to the Ang Chia, their wrists handcuffed behind their backs. The protesters and I surged forward only to be pushed back by the riot squad. Before he got thrown into the riot vehicle, Swee Heng looked back at us and I found myself weakly mouthing, "Be strong."

Press reporters, appearing from nowhere, now gathered, frantically clicking their cameras at Swee Heng. I instinctively ducked, fearing that my face would appear in the next day's newspapers.

Chapter 2 – The Students' Union

THE SECOND-HAND CYCLOSTYLING machine cranked in rhythm to the droning of the ceiling fan, one rolling out "FRAME-UP" leaflets while the other blew them onto the floor of the students' union printing room.

"Martin Chew, can you please turn the blooming fan off before our flyers literally fly out the window?" I pleaded.

"Get some paperweights, it's freaking hot in here." Buried in the mounds of freshly printed leaflets, Martin had no intention of moving away from the desk typewriter. He was typing furiously on a stencil with two fingers.

I fed another ream of yellow A4 paper into the cyclostyling machine, picked up the blown-away leaflets from the floor and piled them on a table together with the others bound in stacks of one thousand.

Mohinder, secretary-general of the students' union, left the executive committee meeting in the next room to check on our progress with the leaflets. "Hey, Min Chan," she said, "how many have we printed?"

"About eighty thousand," I replied hesitantly, after running my eyes over the stacks of leaflets on the table and the floor.

"Good. Some volunteers will be coming in after lunch to pick up whatever you have. More will be coming tomorrow morning."

"Sure, no problem. Hey, who's that Indian guy with the moustache in the meeting?"

"Oi, do you have to refer to people by their race? Anyway, he's Mr P. Raman, the lawyer we got for Swee Heng and the workers. He was granted access to Swee Heng only at 6pm, seven hours after the arrest this morning." She picked up a flyer and examined it. "Swee Heng will be brought before the Magistrate Court tomorrow to be charged with rioting, with the three workers as his accomplices. His arresting case officer claimed that they were found at the scene of the crime by twelve riot police."

"That's total crap!" I shouted, feeling my neck boiling over in mumps of anger. "The riot squad was clearly standing by even before any window was smashed."

"Yes, you'll be called as a witness to say just that. But be prepared: the case officer said they received a 999 phone call from an employee of the workers' union at ten-thirty this morning, saying that Swee Heng and three other persons were destroying property at their office."

"It's clearly a set-up by that eunuch Pey," Martin chimed in.

"Our lawyer heard from his source in the police station that the deputy police commissioner had called three times to check on the progress of

Swee Heng's interrogation," Mohinder said. "So this is not an ordinary rioting case. And no bail granted; they claim he is a flight risk."

"These people were born with no spines and no arseholes," Martin raved.

"Hey, both of you need to attend our next exco meeting. We need all the help we can get," Mohinder said, turning and stepping back into the next room.

The cyclostyling machine jammed from another sheet of paper for the nth time. I opened the sticky inky drum, extricated the crumpled sheet and started the machine again. If it were to carry on behaving this way, we'd never print two hundred thousand sheets, even if Martin and I stayed up all night!

While the machine was not out of paper, the output tray was not crowded and the leaflets were not flying, I stole a few moments to sit on a pile of paper to rest my feet and scrape ink from underneath my fingernails. Martin saw what he thought was me slowing down and did the same.

"You know, if my old man were to find out that I am doing all this, he would sooner kill me than let me continue with my studies here," he said in mock alarm.

"Aiyah, parents don't know what their children do lah; otherwise, why do we have so many school dropouts and drug addicts. Anyway, your dad is usually out in the South China Sea, right? He'll be more worried about his day's catch than what his dear boy is doing in Singapore."

"My father pray every night to Kuan Yin and Guan Gong that I get my bloody degree, even if it means he has to sell his leaky fishing boat. I'm the only one in the family to make it to university, and in Singapore too, no less. Maybe even the only one in the whole kampong of Mersing."

"Since you're so clever, why you always wonder if your father approves of what you do?" I said with a sneer.

“Hey, it’s easy for you to talk like that. But I’m here only because your government deigned to give me a scholarship. If they knew that this Malaysian kampong boy was spending his time typing anti-government stuff and skipping lectures, they would chuck out the scholarship and pack me off the next day.” Martin turned back to his stencil.

“Sorry.” I decided not to further provoke our speed typist, especially not when we still had one hundred twenty thousand more copies of the frame-up flyer to print. After all, he was risking his scholarship and straight A’s to help out at the union, even though, like me, he wasn’t an exco member.

In the prevailing climate, the McCarthyites in the government were fearful that the winds of change blowing across China and Vietnam would fan the embers of subversive thought smouldering in our fledgling student movement. They had been steadily moving in on students and academics, since they already had the trade unions, grassroots organisations and media under their thumb.

It was an intoxicating time; the students’ union was bursting with new ideas from the non-communist Left in the West, variously called Democratic Socialism or Social Democracy. As the full terror of the Chinese Cultural Revolution was still not known to the world, some students were also impressed with the social reforms taking place in China: land for the landless, education for all, the young caring for the old, all this in contrast with the moral decay of the 1930s and 40s suffered by our parents. Those Singaporeans with relatives living in China vicariously experienced famine and starvation on a national scale through letters pleading for what scraps the well fed might have to save lives. My father, who had come to Singapore as an indentured labourer when he was still a boy, had sent rice, preserved vegetables and cooking oil to his sister and her family in Guangzhou during the famine in the late 1950s. Having tasted the piercing corruption and opportunism of Chiang Kai-shek’s regime, and later the human disasters of Mao Zedong’s reforms,

Father became a cynical realist, believing only in his own strong back to feed his family.

Martin’s father was another realist. Hardened by years of perilous deep-sea fishing in his rattletrap boat, and exposed to pirates off the Malaysian east coast, he was determined that his children should have an easier life. He was particularly severe on Martin, his firstborn, on whom he laid the entire responsibility of spreading the family tree, lest he would not be able to face his ancestors when his time came. Martin escaped his father’s expectations by coming to study in Singapore, but carried his mental baggage and family shrine with him.

There was an unwritten rule among student activists to “make sacrifices for the cause”. Both Swee Heng and Mohinder had repeated their second year and were currently repeating their third, having spent more time distributing pamphlets, and talking to workers and squatters, than reading Science. The two Physics majors would not be able to graduate if they failed again this year, but right now graduation was far from their minds. Together with Swee Heng, Mohinder had become the backbone of the students’ union, even though (or because) she often took pride in being the most under-privileged of the under-privileged: a Sikh woman from a poor family, the butt of children’s racial jokes. But her security-guard father had spotted the girl’s talent in chess early on, and made sure that she got to university even if it meant he had to work double-shifts. This was helped by a bursary from the Punjabi Self-Help Association.

And then there was Shu Peng. Didn’t need much swotting, and quite sure he would pass with at least a second upper. He had coached me for the last semester’s exams. Then during the long holidays, he, Martin and I had been assigned to the same group for the Malaysian exposure trip. It had been a good trip that not only opened my eyes to the other half of the world, but also got the three of us much closer.

Thank goodness that exams were still some months away; we still had

time to do this round-the-clock printing. Though how could I think about exams when Swee Heng was still in police custody? I loosened more paper and put the sheets onto the in-tray, emptied the out-tray and tried to have more constructive thoughts. Martin was out of sight—the stacks of flyers had piled so high that he was completely hidden behind the yellow wall of protest.

Chapter 3 – The Trial

OUTSIDE THE MAGISTRATE court on the first day of the trial, students from universities and polytechnics carried placards and banners denouncing the frame-up and calling for the release of all four accused. We cheered when our suited lawyer, Mr P. Raman, arrived in a 1967 Austin, and jeered when Pey and his clerk marched into the building.

Beads of sweat streamed down my face as I joined in the chanting: “Justice Now, Justice Now!” My arms ached from carrying the placards and my legs were wobbly from standing for the past two hours at the car park in front of the court. Traffic slowed down as drivers craned their necks to read our slogans. Quite a few tooted their car horns in a show of solidarity, while many others continued on their road of indifference.

Martin didn’t want to come since he was afraid he would appear in the newspaper. As if the local press would cover our protest when there wasn’t even a whisper from them about the arrest. Maybe he was worried about the Internal Security Department; ISD, the most dreaded three letters in the English alphabet when arranged in that order. I couldn’t blame him; the place was crawling with secret police carrying big black bags, presumably with cameras hidden inside, snapping shots of us. Amid the tension, Mohinder appointed disciplinary stewards to look out for agents provocateurs stirring up trouble to justify a police clampdown.

Our demonstration was, after all, not a familiar scene in a country where people were more used to assembling to take the bus, to go to school, to work factory floors, instead of to get their demands heard. Since having been kicked out of Malaysia and shoved into independence twelve years earlier, the island republic had plunged into a fierce programme of industrialisation. It fetishised nationhood and whipped individualism; as a result, civil rights had been sacrificed to the god Discipline. After weeding out “Red” opposition leaders who were feeding off workers’ unions, the government planted their own grassroots structures across the country to surveil the population.

We were still under the Emergency Law and any gathering of four or more people in a public place constituted an illegal assembly. It was just a matter of time before the police rained down on us. Yet I had not decided whether I was going to run when the police came or stay and be arrested. My mind was preoccupied with the image of a glass of ice cold, fizzy Sarsi when someone tapped my shoulder:

“Hey, shouldn’t you be inside soon?” It was Shu Peng.

“Yah, still early. Our lawyer will call me as witness only after lunch.”

“Okay, stay cool and keep calm. Don’t forget the points I told you.”

“Yah, I got them down pat. How’re you getting in?”

“I got a press card,” he said with a beguiling smile.

“How did you get that?” I asked on our way to the main door.

“I’m the publication secretary of the union, after all,” he said.

The courtroom was so packed that the demonstrators could not enter, even the gallery. Inside were grim-faced students and workers, an air of Armageddon hanging above them. Swee Heng’s mother and brother, as well as Mohinder, were sitting behind their lawyer on the front bench. His mother was clutching a string of rosary beads and watching her son in the dock, together with the three workers. Nobody had the heart to tell her that the presiding judge was none other than S. Krishnan. The prosecution

was being led by the Solicitor-General himself, another overkill from the government, in case the judge lacked prosecutory fervour.

The SG called his witnesses: fiefdom chief Pey, the clerk at the union headquarters and the arresting officer. Pey claimed that when his clerk had come to his room to inform him that the students and workers were there to see him, he had left his room with the clerk, and on their way to the reception area where he had thought the students and workers were waiting, they had heard the loud noises of glass shattering coming from the back office. Upon reaching the scene, he said he'd been horrified to see Swee Heng and the three workers smashing window after window with wooden chairs. The clerk corroborated Pey's statements and added that Pey had then told him to call the police. The arresting officer, Inspector Sim, said that when he and his officers had arrived at the scene after receiving the phone call, they saw the four accused men kicking broken chairs and desks in the back office. A rumbling of disbelief reverberated through the courtroom.

The press box was full of foreign press reporters, while the local ones were visibly absent. Shu Peng and I were squashed at the edge of a bench, our arms brushing against each other as we scribbled notes on the proceedings. I was conscious of my sweat-soaked tee-shirt and clammy skin, but he was more engrossed in monitoring the procedure.

When the court resumed after a two-hour lunch break, it was the turn of our defence counsel to cross-examine:

"Inspector Sim, from your police report, you received a phone call from the Factory Workers' Union Headquarters in Jurong at 10.30am on 15 October 1977 about the alleged riot taking place at that time. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Again, from your police report, you and twelve riot police officers arrived at the scene of the alleged riot at 10.46am. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"So did it truly take you only sixteen minutes to assemble twelve of your riot police officers and travel from the Central Police Station at South Bridge Road to the Factory Workers' Union HQ in the western part of the island?"

Inspector Sim's pause to think of a response seemed longer than the sixteen minutes he had taken to get to the crime scene. Without an objection from the prosecution, the helpful judge intervened: "Question overruled. The efficiency of the riot police is not relevant to the case."

"Your Honour, I am trying to establish that the riot police had been put on stand-by long before the alleged riot took place. My question is to show that someone planned to stage the alleged riot, incriminate my clients and get the police to bear false witness."

"That's mere conjecture on your part, and let me warn you of the severity of your allegation against the police force. Counsel, do you have any more questions for the witness?"

"No, Your Honour. I would now like to call Mr Pey to the witness box." When Pey got to the box, the defence counsel asked: "Mr Pey, after you told your clerk to call the police, did you stop my clients from what you alleged to be smashing the furniture and windows?"

"No, I did not."

"And why not? Surely, as the union chief of the Factory Workers' Union, you would not want your office to be further damaged?"

Pey looked to the judge and said nothing. The judge looked down at his own notes and did not press Pey to answer the question.

Mr Raman was going nowhere with the would-be mafia don, so he dismissed him. I realised it was my turn to be called next and quickly sneaked out of the courtroom, to enter the witness room adjacent to the court through another door. Our lawyer called me to the witness box.

"Ms Fan, you are a member of the University of Singapore Students'

forgoing his football and cricket on weekends to read and comment on my drafts from the point of view of a reader who reads both pulp fiction and the classics.

I am grateful to my dear friend, Joyce Cheng, a bookseller of twenty years at Books Kinokuniya despite her young age, who has assured me that folks in Singapore do buy SingLit in general, and my first novel in particular, and that creative writing is not yet a sunset enterprise.

Finally, writers with my political background usually attract undeserved attention from the government. I am therefore indebted to my intrepid publisher, Edmund Wee, and his team at Epigram Books for sticking their necks out with me.

About the Author

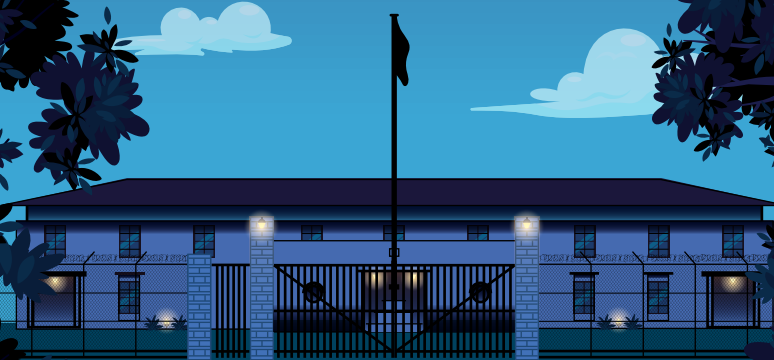


Wong Souk Yee is the author of *Death of a Perm Sec* (finalist for the 2015 Epigram Books Fiction Prize and 2018 Singapore Literature Prize for Fiction) and a former political detainee, who contested the 2015 General Election as a member of the Singapore Democratic Party. She co-founded the now-defunct theatre group Third Stage. In 1987, she was detained for allegedly taking part in a “Marxist conspiracy” against the government; she later wrote the play *Square Moon*, staged in 2013, about detention without trial. Wong holds a PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of New South Wales, Sydney.

“Riveting!”

–Sebastian Sim, award-winning author of
And the Award Goes to Sally Bong!

Three students meet and bond over anti-government protests at university. Min Chan is a budding playwright, Martin is first in his family to reach higher learning, and Shu Peng is destined for politics. Following graduation and for decades afterward, their friendship is threatened by political harassment and intimidation, even as each of them pushes back to try and shape a better future for themselves and the country.



FICTION

ISBN 978-981-51-0506-3



9 789815 105063

www.epigram.sg