

“Direct and bold, yet breathtaking in its fragile beauty.”

—Gerrie Lim, author of *Inside the Outsider*

THE LAST LESSON

of

MRS DE SOUZA

A NOVEL



CYRIL WONG

Additional Praise for the Author

“Cyril Wong tells a simple and stylish coming-out tale that is shaped like a bullet and aimed at the heart of liberal self-righteousness. Under it all, this is also an age-old story of the child who learns a last lesson about trust and the ‘good adult’ whom life is not done rebuking. Do not give this book to an unsuspecting retiring teacher—unless he or she utterly deserves it.”

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

“Cyril Wong is proving himself to be a prose stylist of a calibre that threatens to outdo his poetry, with words so poignant and heartfelt, and a narrative drive that’s often direct and bold yet breathtaking in its fragile beauty.”

—GERRIE LIM, author of *Inside the Outsider*

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“Wong writes profoundly...on what he senses as being the real challenge for most of us...to make meanings of our discontinuous worlds.”

—KIRPAL SINGH, poet, cultural critic and creativity guru

“Cyril...sculpts a space for the reader to think, baffle over and be elated.”

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—O THIAM CHIN, *The Jakarta Post*

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For the teachers who made all the difference,
especially Roslyn Seah and the late Rita Leicester.

CHAPTER 1

I AM SIXTY years old this morning. I have decided that enough is enough.

Today is to be my last day of teaching. The 1990s will be here next year, signifying a promising start, a new phase in my life. I might be old but my health is good; unlike my poor late husband, I could live up to a hundred. I want to travel again. I even plan to write creatively, or paint, or learn to play more difficult pieces of classical music on the piano; maybe something by Gershwin or Debussy. Maybe I just want to do as little as possible in my retirement years. I am really not quite sure what I will do once I have left school for good. As I fantasise about my future, I am also preparing to go to work, drinking my daily glass of orange juice in the kitchen and picking up my files one last time from the dining table, before breezing out from my spacious three-room flat to take the lift to the ground floor, then walking to where my maroon-coloured Mazda is waiting in the public parking lot outside. I do not even bother to catch a glimpse of myself in the car's rear-view mirror, as I already know that my lipstick is impeccably applied; my hair is also, as usual, perfectly in place.

After placing the files on the seat next to mine, I realise that I have forgotten to do my usual meditation practice this

morning. I always meditate for half an hour after I wake up and before I take a shower. But it is also my birthday today, which could be why I have forgotten. Not that today being my birthday is any big deal. I stopped caring about birthdays decades ago. Yet there is still a part of me that nonetheless anticipates the array of birthday cards and flowers (my students usually cannot afford anything more) that will miraculously appear on my table when I step into the classroom later. Such gifts are more often than not a result of custom and formality, something that students in the school have always done because they have felt obliged to do so when it came to ‘special’ occasions like a birthday or Teachers’ Day. At the same time, I am convinced that at least a few of the gifts will be sincerely given. I have never expected everyone to like me in the classroom; but I also know that, as a teacher, I have not been particularly unkind or unreasonable either; in fact, I believe that I have been sufficiently warm-hearted and generous towards my boys for the time that I have instructed them. I am certain that some of them are genuinely gratified by this, and will express their gratitude and respect through their gifts.

But first things first. I rest both my hands on the steering wheel and close my eyes.

Meditation is important to me. I am not Buddhist—in fact, I am not particularly religious in any sense—but I am a firm believer in the healthy effects of meditation, and a general believer in the intrinsic goodness of all life. I have neither believed that the driving force of creation possesses a personality that can be summed up by any holy book, nor that

existence is a gaping void that eats at the soul, as Existentialist philosophers would have it. I mostly believe, deep in my bones, that life is very simply beyond description; regardless of what one makes of it, life always spills over the parameters of how anyone has chosen to define it.

As my eyes stay closed, with the breath moving slowly in and out of my lungs, I think about my late husband. It was Christopher de Souza who taught me about how meditation is a practice that is universal, transcending any talk of faith or religious denominations. From Hindu sadhus in India to Tibetan monks to French Christian mystics, meditation is a common practice that helps a person return to a state of untainted awareness, as well as an awareness of one’s surroundings, and all without preconceived notions, judgements, the ups and downs of turbulent emotions, or even pain. It was meditation that helped Christopher when his body fought against pancreatic cancer in the last weeks of his life.

“Rose,” Christopher said one time at the hospital when I visited him, not knowing that we were nearing the last few days of our time together, “do you know that when I meditate, the pain seems to move further and further away? It is as if you become part of something larger than yourself, so that pain becomes only a small part of all that you can be.”

I remember stroking his back as he described this. This memory is followed by a flashback-summary (for some unknowable reason, such flashbacks occur more frequently in my life now that I am older) of all the events leading up to his eventual death, from the quarrels we had (started mostly

by me) whenever I tried to dissuade him from mentioning his death (a fact I did not need reminding of), to his sudden bloating after meals, the escalating weight loss (I had never seen him look so sallow and gaunt in our thirty years of marriage), and then the jaundiced hue of his skin that became disturbingly pronounced during the week before he passed away. He died in his sleep in his hospital bed. His death happened while I was asleep on the visitor's couch that had been moved so I could sit closer to my husband. I had already been so exhausted from staying up late every night before the very evening he gave up on his life and left me for good.

I really had wanted to be awake when it happened, or to be there, at the very least, to hold his hand while he gasped one last time, or whatever the living are supposed to do, voluntarily or otherwise, at the moment of the spirit's departure. I had also wanted to say "I'll miss you" or, even better, "I love you". I had hoped that he would find the last-minute strength to say some final words to me too, something moving and memorable.

Thankfully, as it is still early in the morning, no neighbours are walking past my car while I am inside, wondering if there is something odd about the old but elegant Eurasian woman clutching the steering wheel with her eyes firmly closed. Finally, I open my eyes and gaze out onto the car park that brightens with every new breath I take. I miss Christopher, but he is gone. I insert my car key, turn on the engine, and begin my slow and careful drive to school.

About the Author

Cyril Wong is the Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of poetry collections such as *Unmarked Treasure*, *Tilting Our Plates to Catch the Light* and *Satori Blues*, as well as a collection of strange short fiction called *Let Me Tell You Something About That Night*. He has served as a mentor under the Creative Arts Programme and the Mentor Access Project, as well as a judge for the Golden Point Awards in Singapore. A past recipient of the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award for Literature, he completed his doctoral degree in English Literature at the National University of Singapore in 2012.

“An unsentimental yet moving narrative, a sobering alternative to *Dead Poets Society* and *To Sir, With Love*. With its deep probing look at the teaching profession, it unveils a rich array of themes—homosexual awakening, human actions and consequences, the individual in conflict with society, and most compellingly, the nature of perhaps the most noble and difficult of vocations.”

—Boey Kim Cheng, author of *Clear Brightness*

One last time and on her birthday, Rose de Souza is returning to school to give a final lesson to her classroom of secondary school boys before retiring from her long teaching career. What ensues is an unexpected confession in which she recounts the tragic and traumatic story of Amir, a student from her past who overturned the way she saw herself as a teacher, and changed her life forever.

This stunning first novel from award-winning poet Cyril Wong is a tour de force, an exceptional examination of the power of choice and the unreliability of memory.



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