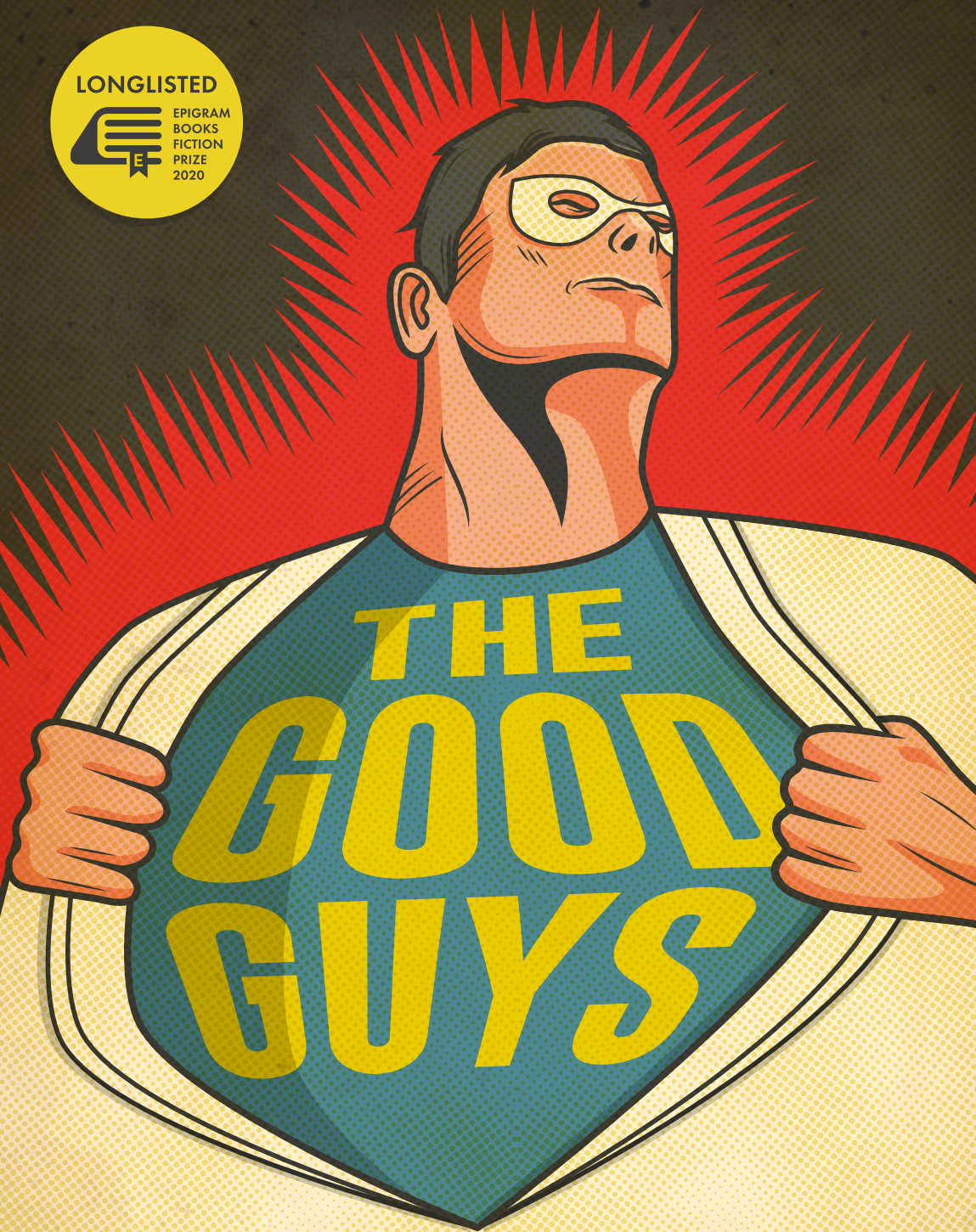


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EPIGRAM
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2020



DARREN CHEN

**THE
GOOD
GUYS**

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DARREN CHEN



EPIGRAM

*To You
Who was once
The night sky and the sea,
May you live forever.*

1

“Your name again, please.”

The young man’s cautious words tripped over his chapped lips. “My name is...people call me Landslide.”

The sound of tapping fingers softly thudded on a surface. “Ah, yes. I have you on file. Geo-kinesis, is that correct?” the Caretaker asked.

“That’s me. Good with rocks.”

“Excellent. Geo-kinesis—it is not an entirely uncommon ability.”

The Caretaker set his slim data pad down on the clean desk in front of them and stood up. The brilliant white robe he was wearing barely moved, his face concealed by an impassive, full-faced white mask.

Landslide rose to to his feet too. Even though he was tall and sturdily built, the Caretaker still loomed over him like a pale tree. Landslide could only see his own black eyes staring back at him when he peered up into the Caretaker’s visor.

“Now that I have you registered, please follow me to your habitation suite,” the Caretaker said, starting towards the exit of the sparsely

furnished room. He bowed slightly, gesturing for Landslide to step outside into the dim corridor.

The door hissed shut behind them. They were alone in the bowels of the Singapore General Hospital, away from the bustle. The Caretaker moved silently, almost seeming to glide across the linoleum floor. Landslide had to struggle to keep up, striding past EAT RIGHT and HEALTHIER TOGETHER posters plastered across the walls. He grimaced at the sound of his own sneakers squeaking on the polished surface.

They arrived at an elevator bay. There was only one set of double doors, and the access panel had a single button that pointed down. The Caretaker pressed it.

There was a soft ding, and the doors opened. The elevator was well-lit and spacious. Landslide turned towards the Caretaker, only to find the assistant staring back inscrutably, as though expecting him to take the first step. It took a moment before Landslide realised how irked he was by his inability to see anything past the featureless mask.

They stepped into the elevator; the doors slid close behind them. Their smooth and quiet descent began.

“You realise,” the Caretaker said, breaking the silence, “that you don’t have to save anybody but yourself here. The only objective is for you to walk out a better person than when you entered. This is not nearly as straightforward an endeavour as stopping a bank robbery or helping an old lady cross the street. You will find that this will take time. That, you will learn, is perfectly all right.”

“So I can take as much time as I want?” Landslide asked.

The Caretaker nodded. “You are allowed to take as long as you need.”

The elevator slowed to a stop. “Are you ready?” the Caretaker asked gently.

“I am, I guess. I’m here now. Better late than never.”

“Very well,” the Caretaker said. The double doors opened.
“Welcome to the Vault.”

2

“The records show that you are a veteran,” the Caretaker stated, referring to a conflict that had ended some twenty years ago. The assistant was leading them past yet another corridor, which was as sterile and unblemished as anything else Landslide had seen in the Vault.

“The records are...well.” Landslide awkwardly cleared his throat. “I was born after the War—I mean, during the War.”

“Which one is it?” the Caretaker asked, turning to look at Landslide.

“During, during.” Landslide smiled, sheepishly. “The tail end of it. I’ve got good genes, I’ve been told. A babyface, you know?” he said, touching his cheek.

The Caretaker made a sound of undisguised annoyance. “Incorrect records...unacceptable. I will have to make the necessary corrections.”

“It’s all right,” Landslide said, attempting to assuage his companion. “I’m sure it doesn’t matter too much.”

“These are basic administrative rules,” the Caretaker explained. “If we did not know who had served in the Alliance or in the Federation, and if a number of both were to collide here, it could be a disaster.”

“It could get violent,” Landslide said lamely, “which would be bad...of course.”

“Correct. We have no room for violence here. That is why we have our rules. Your abilities are recorded, and your suite is uniquely scanned to you.”

The Caretaker paused, before continuing. “I apologise if I discomfited you with my questions—that was impolite of me. Many who come here fought in the War, and many of those who did not remain touched by it. Speaking of rules, I do require you to take note: you may stay here as long as you wish or until it is decided that it is your time to go. You may exit freely, but the same cannot be said for your re-entry—you cannot join us without being registered again.”

“I understand,” Landslide said. “These have been demanding times...not just for this country, but the whole world too.”

“I am glad that you can appreciate the need for security in a place like this. It is a necessarily delicate topic. While we are on the subject, allow me to provide you with this.” A slim wristband appeared in the Caretaker’s open palm.

Landslide picked it up and was surprised when it opened into a hefty mask. The front of the mask looked like the Caretaker’s own—matte white—but with the mouth and jaw areas uncovered, while the back was embellished with thin, gold lines winding across its recesses.

“Heavier than it looks,” Landslide commented as he ran a thumb gently over the mask’s shallow grooves.

“Most here choose to wear their masks in the common areas for anonymity, which I am sure you will find to be entirely reasonable,” the Caretaker explained. “Some do not—the choice is yours. Regardless, you are advised not to lose this mask. It is keyed to you alone, and it is how the staff will be able to identify you. Keep it with you at all times.”

Landslide slipped the mask on and found that it fit comfortably, then took it off.

“What happens,” he asked, “if someone were to try to pretend to be someone they weren’t?”

The Caretaker cocked his head. “This is a home for superheroes. The trust that is afforded to them, that they deserve...what would they stand to gain by losing it?”

“Nothing.” Landslide looked away. “I’d guess they wouldn’t.”

“This is a place for recuperation. There is no room for deceit in this sanctuary, and even less so amongst our residents. The very thought is preposterous.”

“Aye...” Landslide agreed.

“That was the intent of the Phase Sixers when they created this facility,” the Caretaker said. The Phase Sixers was a superhero team renowned across the world, made famous by the War. Every child had a favourite Sixer.

“They felt that those who have been gifted, as you have been, would require a place to rest when they grew weary, when the burden of these gifts become too much to bear,” the Caretaker continued. “Having been creations of the War themselves, they knew that even the strongest and most resilient amongst you would crack eventually. It has happened before, and they have every expectation that it will happen again.”

“Aye. Everyone breaks.”

They began to pass by shuttered doors, each one with an access panel.

“Seems to me,” Landslide wondered aloud, “that the Vault takes up quite a lot of room.”

“There are multiple floors and subsections, as you will find, connected by staircases. Placing the Vault’s entrance within the general hospital has evident benefits—it keeps prying eyes away. The Phase Sixers wanted to hide the facility from inquisitive civilians, or anyone who might be more malicious. And with the considerable resources at their disposal, building the Vault underground was an obvious

solution—the Phase Sixers could expand the facility without arousing suspicion from anyone above ground. No one would have expected this place to be beneath one of Singapore’s densest locations.”

Landslide agreed; he had blended in easily with the throngs of patients, passing by gaggles of bickering ah gongs while trying to find the Vault.

“Your discretion is appreciated, Landslide,” the Caretaker continued. “Only superheroes are supposed to know of the Vault’s existence, so do remain cognisant of our restrictions on movements in and out of the facility. We must ensure that our location is not compromised.”

“Just as a matter of curiosity...what happens if we forget that?” Landslide asked.

“You would do well not to find out.” The Caretaker cocked his head. “I suppose you would be barred from returning. Remember, the superheroes who come here depend on us to protect their anonymity. The civilians who depend on them—the image of them—cannot afford to see them broken, and for that reason, this is a promise that we cannot break. The Vault and all its staff are here to help you get better, not to punish you. Help us keep on helping you—that is all that is asked of you.”

They came to a stop in front of a room.

“This is your habitation suite,” the Caretaker announced as he keyed in a few numbers into the access panel. The door slid open. “We hope you enjoy your stay.”

3

Landslide was alone in his assigned room. He found that his bags had been arranged neatly in a corner.

The Caretaker had presented him with a folded robe before leaving. It was blank and clean-pressed. “Feels like I’m becoming a monk,” Landslide had said when he took the robe from the Caretaker.

“Indeed, the comparison has some merit. The Phase Sixers wanted to facilitate the sort of special rehabilitation and recovery required for those who...don the capes, so to speak. To that end, they decided a simple, neutral attire would help alleviate the weight of your identities via anonymity. The point stands: here in the Vault, you can be as faceless as you want to be. It is up to you. The Vault is only here to help.”

Everything had been prepared for his arrival—the room itself was spartan, but comfortable; there was a bed, a desk, some lamps. All these simple furnishings were squared away cleanly. It seemed cosy, almost like a hotel. The Caretaker had assured Landslide that he would not have to visit the common areas if he did not want to; meals could be brought to his room if he so desired. Nevertheless, the Caretaker

had encouraged him to socialise, if only because the burden of solitude could be unpleasant.

Landslide unpacked and sat down at the foot of his bed. He balanced the mask that had been issued to him in his hands, flipping it over several times. He looked up at the wardrobe in front of him and knew that behind its closed doors hung his creased and crumpled costume. For what it was worth, he had never really understood the old obsession with spandex. He figured there were so many other fabrics that made for easier washing.

Landslide put the mask on, closing his eyes and feeling the strange material wrap around his features. Sitting in the darkness of the room, he inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. He let his mind follow the gentle, methodical rhythm of his breathing. He felt his hands tremble, just barely. Quickly, he gripped them tight, willing them to stop.

He decided to take a walk outside. He sighed, dragged himself to his feet and put on his robes. The door slid open at his touch and he stepped into the hallway...and found the Caretaker waiting for him. Landslide recoiled in surprise, instinctively raising his fists.

“A little tense, are we now?” The tall masked man held his palms up in what seemed like mock surrender.

Landslide realised, in spite of the Caretaker’s monotone, that that might have been a joke.

“Unfamiliar place and faces.” Landslide coughed, awkwardly.

“I understand. Still, no fighting allowed. This is a good opportunity for me to remind you that all residents are highly discouraged from exercising their powers in any situation unless absolutely necessary. There should be no need to; if it may allay your concerns, I would state again that there are only good people here.”

“Or what passes for one in this day and age,” Landslide retorted.

“I suppose. You can be at peace here. You are safe.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Landslide fell into step with his companion as they ambled past doors identical to his own. There was a mild draft down the corridor that breezed past the fabric of his white robes. It felt a little chilly. “Are these all...”

“Habitation suites?” the Caretaker finished. “They are, but not all are occupied. We are having what passes for a lull period here in the Vault—there are no more than twenty occupants registered at this time. Theoretically, the Vault can cater for many more than that... but thankfully, such a situation has never come to pass.”

“Hopefully, it never will.” Landslide rubbed his elbows. “Where are we going now?”

“I figured that you should tour the common areas first. Familiarity with this facility’s layout will come with time, but until then, I would recommend that you keep your pocket map with you until you can navigate easily on your own.”

The Caretaker looked pointedly at Landslide. “You do have it on you? It was left on your nightstand, along with a copy of the Vault’s rules and regulations. It is given to every resident for reference.”

“I...uh...sure.” Landslide found himself at a loss for words, not just because he had failed to check his nightstand—which he was already chiding himself for neglecting to do—but because of the monolithic figure that had just walked past them. His footfalls sounded like a marching army. If the Caretaker was a tree, this man was a mountain.

The monolith wore his mask as a loop on his wrist, and was outfitted in sports attire that would have been several shades lighter if it had been left out to dry. He seemed exhausted, not just from training or exercise, but from what one might have seen fit to describe as a general sense of world-weariness. And he looked *angry*—as though possessed of a certain turbulence, a fury that may have once fallen dormant but had

since been itching to stir. His gaze was trained far away. Landslide could feel the tension radiating off the man, could see it in the tautness of his arms. He could sense it through the rippling vibrations in the ground, in the stiffness of every footfall. The man exuded a predatory wariness despite his apparent fatigue. He stomped on by, acknowledging neither Landslide nor the Caretaker. In that seconds-long encounter, Landslide found himself completely unnerved.

“And you thought I was high-strung...” Landslide muttered. “I thought you said there were only good people here.”

“A nebulous definition,” the Caretaker shrugged. “Addenda are important. ‘One man’s hero,’ as they say. Also, while we are on the topic, you should know that that man is your next-door neighbour.”

“Just my luck,” Landslide grumbled his acquiescence.

They carried on. Moving away from what the Caretaker described as the “residential zone”, the pair wound through the Vault’s many corridors, past storerooms and gyms filled with well-maintained sporting equipment. At one point, Landslide saw a swimming pool and a running track through a window. The Caretaker explained that exercise was a useful therapy.

Landslide was awed by the sheer scale of the place. *No wonder*, he thought drily to himself, *that the Phase Sixers could be a cut above the rest. They could afford it.*

“If at any time you require anything, you need only ask—the Vault will do its best to provide,” the Caretaker said. “When you are ready for a session with the Mirror, just let any of the staff know.”

“Mirror? Why do I need a mirror?”

“Not a mirror...*the* Mirror. It is how we hope you will get better here in the Vault, which is a sanctuary for reflection and introspection. I understand that it may seem vague, but it is not as complicated or as fantastical as you might imagine it to be. It will be made clear to you in due time.”

“I...see?” Landslide instantly cursed himself inwardly at the uncertainty in his voice. “All right, then. No chance of getting an early look at that Mirror, then?”

“The Mirror is not something you merely ‘look’ at. It is more than just a description. It is a title.”

“I’m not catching on,” Landslide replied. “The Mirror is a person?”

“You will understand when you are in the Mirror’s presence.” The Caretaker paused. “Which, again, I understand, is hardly a satisfactory answer. You will see during your session.”

“Could I have a session tomorrow?”

“Do you think you are ready for it? It is not necessarily the most pleasant experience, and you have only just arrived. You have yet to get yourself well-acquainted with the rest of the Vault.”

“Can’t know if I’m ready for it if I don’t know what it is. I mean...I chose to be here. I’m going to have to deal with this Mirror eventually. Might as well get on with it.”

“Very well. If that is what you want, I shall have it arranged. In any case, I believe that this is a discussion that can be continued later. After all, we have arrived.” The Caretaker gestured towards a lighted sign that spelt CANTEEN. “May I suggest that it would now be a good time for lunch? Perhaps you would like to get to know some of the others.”

Landslide considered it before he shrugged in agreement. He walked in to join the party, with the Caretaker at his side.

4

It all looked surprisingly normal. The canteen was the sort of cafeteria one might expect to find in a school, albeit buried deep underground. It had been built with the same consistent aesthetic as everywhere else in the Vault: pristine and sterile, brightly lit and polished.

Here and there people ambled about, queuing for food, chatting amongst themselves. The residents mostly gathered in small, scattered groups. A few sat alone, apart from the others. Some were masked, some were not. All were fully robed. Soft snatches of their conversations drifted over to where Landslide sat.

The Vault’s residents were attended to by several figures that looked exactly like the Caretaker. A few more stood at the canteen’s perimeter, keeping an eye on things. They looked like white wallflowers that had been pulled off a factory line. He turned to make a remark about this to the Caretaker, but found that he had disappeared.

When Landslide realised that his Caretaker could have been any of the tall masked individuals, it became clear to him that “Caretaker” was not a name, but a label given to all of the staff at the Vault. The

Caretaker who had brought him to his room might not have been the same one who had just given him the tour around the Vault—a thought he found mildly disconcerting.

His thoughts were interrupted by a gruff voice.

“Either they’re spat out deaf nowadays, or they’re spat out with an attention span shorter than my little finger. Hey, daydreamer.”

Landslide was jolted back into awareness by fingers snapping in his face.

Satisfied that he had Landslide’s attention, the man leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. He was unmasked. Lean, lithe and pale, he looked like he hadn’t shaved in several days. He seemed to be quite a bit older than Landslide, perhaps teetering on the edge of forty. “I take it you weren’t listening, then?”

“Sorry,” Landslide apologised. “I’m still getting used to this place.”

The man snorted. “Of course. That’s what the new ones always say.” He ran a hand through his close-cropped hair and took a deep breath. When he next spoke, his voice softened. “I’m sorry. The first day is always rough. Or, well, *different* to what most of us are used to, I suppose. You’ll adjust.”

After queuing for his lunch, Landslide had looked for a table and, finding this man seated at one alone, asked if he could join him. The offer was readily accepted.

“As I was saying,” the man continued, “I’m Legion. I multiply—I mean, I can make copies of myself. Lots of copies. Or I...I used to. I’m still working on that.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Here in the Vault? Going on a year, I guess? Maybe two? A few days more than that? You start to lose track when you’re here long enough.”

“What happened to you?”

Legion scoffed and squinted at Landslide. “That’s pretty forward of

you,” he grunted. “Not many people are willing to ask that straight-up before they’ve even shaken hands.”

“I...I’m sorry,” Landslide back-pedalled. “I don’t know how sensitive this can be—”

He was cut off by Legion’s harsh laughter. “You don’t need to apologise. I like people who are cut straight from that old-school, no-bullshit cloth. They’re rarer than you think. I would know—I used to be a soldier.”

“...And that’s how he throws you down the rabbit hole of his war stories.” A woman slid next to Legion on his bench. “Nice to meet you. Glad you’re joining us for lunch.”

The woman set her tray down on the table. Her hood was pulled back, revealing long, brown hair that was tied up in a ponytail. She was wearing her mask, but Landslide could see that her lips were turned up in a smile.

“You can call me Seraph—everyone does. You’ll excuse the mask. If you haven’t realised by now, some of us like to hold on tightly to our aliases. I’m a flier,” she said, reaching for Landslide’s hand and shaking it. Her voice was soft and lilting, almost like a song. “You’re new, aren’t you? Only a fresh face would pick this lonely old man to be a first acquaintance. See, everyone else here knows to stuff wool in their ears and find someone else to talk to. Welcome to the Vault.”

“Not that old,” Legion grumbled. “Not that lonely, either.”

That got a smile out of Landslide. “And how long have you been here for?”

“A few weeks,” Seraph shrugged. She produced a spoon and poked experimentally at her food, which Landslide had determined to be some type of steamed chicken. It smelled good, despite its pale appearance. “A handful and a half? The days and the weeks roll on by, and the numbers tick on and on. I don’t know...not long enough, I guess.”

“You don’t mean that,” Legion objected.

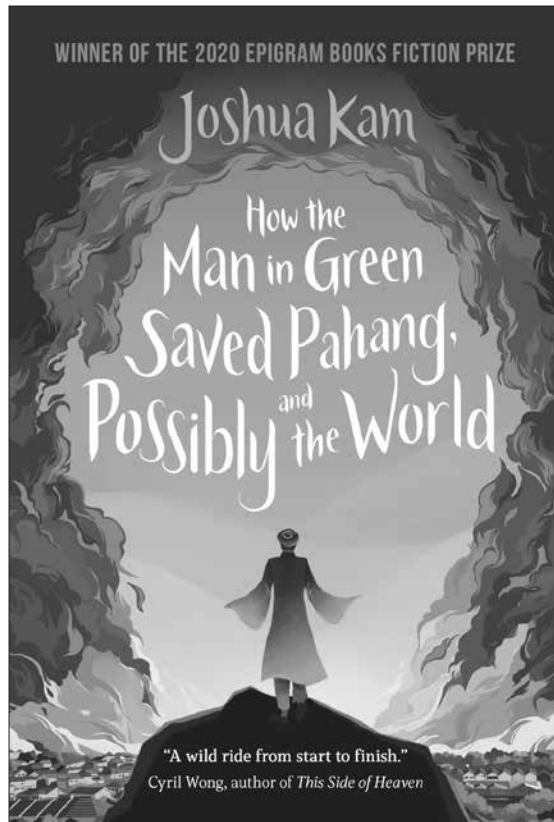


About the Author

Darren Chen is an undergraduate with the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Law. Before matriculating, he served as a lieutenant with the Republic of Singapore Navy, and prior to that he graduated from the Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) in 2015.

He started writing short-form prose with the Ministry of Education's Creative Arts Programme back in his secondary school days. He realised that writing allowed him to escape the mundane routine of student life and build worlds beyond the classroom. He draws and paints in his spare time. His love for comics endures still.

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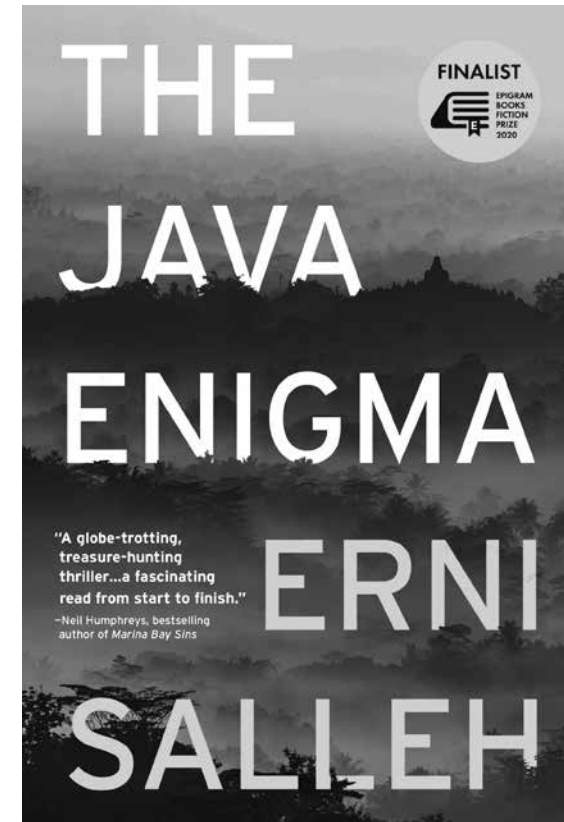


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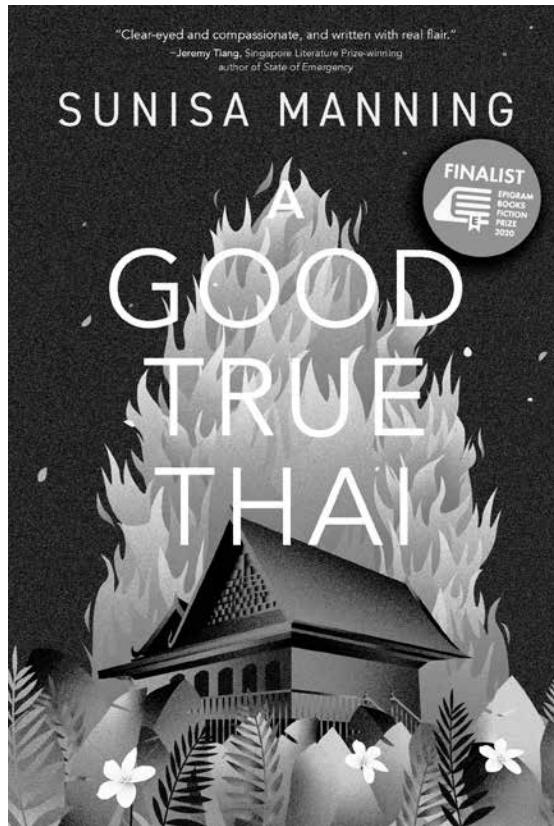
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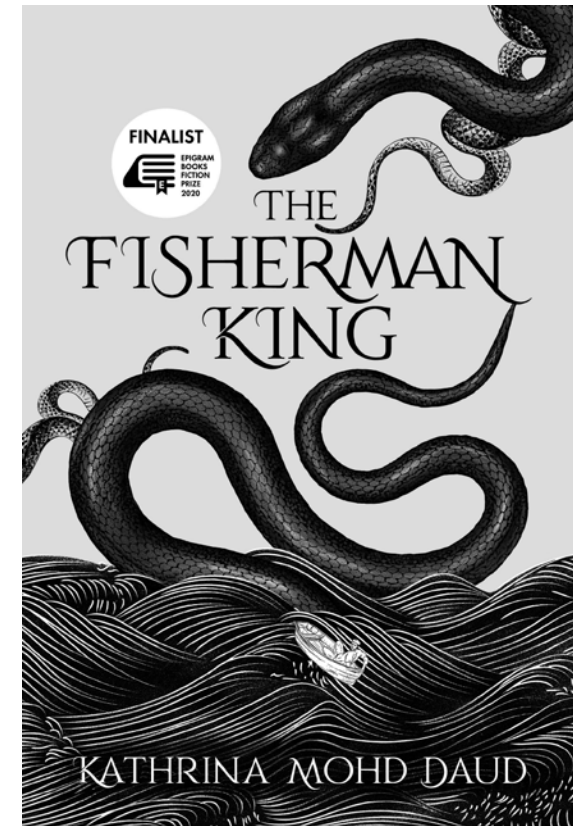
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