

"The definitive Singaporean novel"

LONELY PLANET

Heartland

DAREN SHIAU

Acclaim for *Heartland*

“The definitive Singaporean novel.”

—*Lonely Planet*

“There is a poetic clarity to Shiau’s writing that transforms ordinary landscapes we Singaporeans stride past unseeingly every day into literary *mise-en-scène*.”

—*The Straits Times*

“Daren Shiau’s *Heartland* is one of the first Singapore novels in English to render the experience of living in heartlands a central theme and link it crucially to an investigation of identity and place... [the text] seek[s] implicitly to claim the heartland space and the figure of the heartlander as authentically Singaporean, disclosing to differing extents and levels of self-consciousness, the cultural, social, and political fissures in Singapore society, as well as the limits of imagining alternatives.”

—Dr Angelia Poon, Associate Professor of Literature at NTU, from ‘Common Ground, Multiple Claims: Representing and Constructing Singapore’s “Heartland”’, *Asian Studies Review* (2013)

“A personal vision. A personal response. That is what Shiau has developed to a remarkable extent.”

—Edwin Thumboo, Emeritus Professor at NUS, Cultural Medallion recipient for Literature

“*Heartland* is a song to the ground, full of question of understated irony, from a person in love with his nation.”

—Dave Chua, author of *Gone Case* and *The Beating and Other Stories*

Heartland

Heartland
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ISBN 978-981-18-1120-3 (paperback)
ISBN 978-981-18-1145-6 (ebook)

Published under the imprint Ethos Books
by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
#06-131 Midview City
28 Sin Ming Lane
Singapore 573972
www.ethosbooks.com.sg

Supported by:



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Cover photography by Toni Cuhadi
Cover and layout design by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
Printed by Ho Printing Singapore Pte Ltd

1 2 3 4 5 6 25 24 23 22 21

First published under this imprint in 2002

Typefaces: Adobe Caslon Pro, Halyard Display
Material: 80gsm GHS Smooth Cream

Name(s): Shiau, Daren V. L.

Title: Heartland / Daren V.L. Shiau.

Description: Singapore : Ethos Books, [2021] | First published under this imprint in 2002.

Identifier(s): OCN 1252805986 | ISBN 978-981-18-1120-3 (paperback)

Subject(s): LCSH: Singaporean fiction (English)

Classification: DDC S823--dc23

Heartland

Daren Shiau



*Have I ever left it?
When I die, Dublin will be found engraved upon my heart.*

—James Joyce

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Publisher's Foreword

FONG HOE FANG:

IN HIS 1999 National Day Rally address, then-prime minister Goh Chok Tong suggested that two broad categories of people would emerge in a developing Singapore—'cosmopolitans' and 'heartlanders'.

The cosmopolitans were described by him as such: "... their outlook is international. They speak English but are bilingual. They have skills that command good incomes... They produce goods and services for the global market. Many cosmopolitans use Singapore as a base to operate in the region. They can work and be comfortable anywhere in the world."

His description of heartlanders was that they "... make their living within the country. Their orientation and interests are local rather than international. Their skills are not marketable beyond Singapore. They speak Singlish. They include taxi-drivers, stallholders, provision shop owners, production workers and contractors."

He further emphasised the differences between these two groups, and the importance of maintaining cohesion between them and getting them to identify with each other, otherwise "... our society will fall apart."

As a citizen, I was a little put-off that my people and myself had been painted out of a small, always vulnerable (so we are always told) nation in the throes of finding itself.

I marvelled at how imaginative one could be in reconstructing

Preface

HERE ARE THREE REFLECTIONS I have as *Heartland* is reissued in 2021 by Ethos Books. It is a kind gesture, and I am very indebted.

My first reflection: I turn 50 this year. I had embarked on the novel *Heartland* at 25; it was published when I turned 28.*

Singapore was quite a different place back then.

One relevance of the novel being set in the late '80s and early '90s is that the world was on the cusp of the Internet, and of widespread mobile connectivity. Just one of the main characters had a 'modem line', and none of them owned a cellular device. As time passed, and as ennui crept in, they found it difficult to keep in touch. That is how relationships frayed and fragmented quietly back then.

Second, *Heartland* has become part of that body of SingLit and film known as 'HDBCORE'. It includes Dave Chua's *Gone Case*, Alfian Sa'at's *Corridor* (with which *Heartland* shared the

* *Heartland* the novel was preceded by *Heartland* the poetry collection, which has been one of ten poetry collections shortlisted for the 1995 Singapore Literature Prize. Shortlisted poets, who were acquainted through that event, went on to fraternise, to organise ground-up literary events, and travel on overseas literary tours to evangelise SingLit. It became known as the 'Class of 95", and its significance has been documented elsewhere in Singapore literary recorded history.

Part I: Days

I

THE BODY OF water hung against the afternoon sky, like a suspended lump of molten glass, before crashing into a spray on the ground.

Seconds passed and the hidden jets shot another volley, this time at intervals, so that the pinnacles formed a momentary cascading spiral.

Wing sat on a ledge near the jet fountain at Bugis Junction, the hot sun beating down in front of him. The streams, blasted high and fast over the hour, were now quelling to a measured pace, defying the comfort of repetition.

It was easy to be addicted. Strollers paused to look and were reluctant to move on.

Wing was not paying close attention. Instead, his eyes were focused on window reflections of the building towering over the shophouses on North Bridge Road. Wing removed his glasses and pulled at his shirt to wipe off the droplets that the fine spray had left on his lenses.

He had just been to the CMPB to register for his NS and wasn't in the mood to go back to college for the two-hour Econs lecture. Wing couldn't believe that his life was coming at him so quickly. First, it was the O-level results in December. Then, the giddy three months in JC with new friends and a new lifestyle. Before he knew it, the thrill had become routine and he was faced with weekly common tests, the promotional exams, drama rehearsals and

then the conscription letter. If there is one incident to mark the coming of age of a young Singaporean male, it is the arrival of the conscription letter. A flimsy “On Government Service” document with perforated edges, the ink weak from numerous printouts for the new cohort; the summon seems clinical, seems unreal.

The afternoon crowd was lackadaisical. Opposite him, two schoolgirls, still in uniform, huddled and then giggled. A mother called out to her toddler who stood rooted, mesmerised by the dancing water.

Wing decided to go. As he stood to leave, Wing instinctively touched his trouser pocket to feel for his wallet. He noticed a model of a wooden junk at the edge of the square next to the carpark. It looked like a vessel used by the Bugis which he’d seen in his history books. Wing imagined the Klang Valley warriors emerging from the fabric of history, kris and spears held high, shouting and charging forth but then falling into confusion at the air-conditioned and glass-roofed Hylam Street. Wing let out an involuntary laugh in his mind. But what if they had come a decade earlier when the street was filled with nightclubs and transvestites? There would be a brawl between his Malayan cousins and the American sailors! Seamen of different continents clashing on the turf of illicit pleasure.

How hilarious!

Wing noticed that he never laughed aloud when he was alone no matter how funny a situation might be. It seemed strange. To him, laughing was a social thing. He laughed when watching comedies with Shamkumar and Audrey as a sign that he acknowledged the humour too. But what did he have to prove to himself when not in any company? If he thought it was humorous, he enjoyed the moment privately.

The door to the Hotel Inter-Continental swung open. Wing looked for the toilet. He moved briskly as he felt out of place in his school uniform. The lounge in the lobby, furnished with armchairs and table lamps, was occupied by only two idle tai-tais with Louis Feraud paper bags and some Caucasian men in suits. It was instantly likeable. The subtle oriental touches to the European decor, together with piped-in Bach, gave the place an air of colonialism which would have been so offensive to his grandfather yet so appealing to Wing himself.

In two generations, the old wounds of his ancestors had disappeared. Not healed, just no longer relevant.

Taking the MRT at rush hour in the evenings had a depressing air about it. The crowds would force themselves into whatever little standing space there was, oblivious to status and apparel. Wing had just managed to shuffle himself into one of the cabins. The door-closing bell was sounding off in an ominous peal and there was a mad clatter of soles and heels from the train across the platform. The doors slid together and half opened in a teasing, mocking way at the commuters who had just missed it, and then shut again.

Wing glanced at the disappointed faces slowing to a halt as the train pulled away, screeching into the dark tunnel where the long windows became mirrors for the people facing them.

The sun, now low, rushed into the cabin as the train emerged into the Redhill estate. Dusk was an evocative time of the day for Wing. The period between six and darkness gave him a bittersweet feeling. All around, people in business clothes and uniforms seemed placid and unmoved, almost sad, on their return journey.

Frame by frame, the skyline of his estate emerged as the train hugged the arc of the track at Commonwealth. Wing had lived there for fifteen years and still felt a warm glow whenever he saw

the majesty of the four point blocks piercing the orange dusk sky and the lower blocks, old but graceful, rising proudly from the soil.

He alighted at Buona Vista station in time to see his schoolmates boarding through the same doors. He walked to school every day and only took public transport on a weekday if he had to go away from his campus.

The station was alive with the sounds of silver turnstiles, their red jaws chugging through the motions of opening and closing for thousands of heartlanders spilling out into the estates.

Once off the crowded escalator, many gathered impatiently around the old newspaper vendor and her makeshift mahjong-table stall for the evening papers. Some moved into queues to top up their farecards. Wing followed the rest of the crowd, silent but resolute, through the underpass and then through the sheltered walkway to his block.

The barren afternoon pavements were now prolific with residents.

Relieved but weary, they made their way up lifts, onto landings and into hundreds of flats. Wing could almost hear the symphony of iron gates being unlocked and slammed resonating throughout the blocks, of TVs being turned on, the sizzles as fish were thrown into woks and the metallic quivering of aluminium bathroom doors. The sounds repeated themselves, like a pulse of life, echoing through the corridors and void decks, the heartbeat of the estate rushing to a sustained crescendo over the evening hour.

As he stepped into the lift lobby, the fluorescent tubes and yellow lamppost bulbs flickered to life for their night vigil. It was seven exactly. Nightfall was coming and ache would soon merge into comfort.

The estate would come alive again.

II

“HERE,” AUDREY SAID as she handed a stack of xeroxed papers to Wing.

“Thanks,” Wing murmured. It was a set of Econs notes from the lecture he missed and it was in Audrey’s unmistakably neat handwriting. He sometimes wished that he could miss every single lesson and borrow all her notes at the end of the year for the exams.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“What?”

“The CMPB thing.”

“Oh.” Before Wing could say more, he felt a tap on his shoulder and knew who it was instantly. The Eternity cologne, one dose too strong, permeated the air around them. It was Shamkumar. His file, plastered on the front with a black-and-white picture of Claudia Schiffer from one of his GQs, slapped against the table next to Wing. He whirled around to see Sham, straddling the canteen bench. Sham was a tall Indian with strong shoulders.

“So, how man? Tell us about it.”

“All right, what do you want to know?”

“Just tell us what happened lah,” Sham pressed. “Mine is next Monday.”

“Well, we just went through the routine of the urine test, eyesight test and all that jazz to make sure we’re PES A and B or something like that.”

“What are you?”

“I don’t know,” Wing confessed. He hadn’t asked.

The assembly bell clanged noisily, like a community gong, to announce the start of the day.

Eugene was in the lecture theatre before them. Eugene was one of those guys who wore cotton pants and deck shoes without socks to college but always got away with it. Although he drove to school, he had a way of being late and missing the assembly. Sham and Wing sat on either side of him.

“I tell you, man,” he began once they sat down. “I was at Xanadu last night and I met this real babe. She’s a stewardess with Cathay Pacific—I tell you, you should have seen her.”

Sham began talking excitedly with Eugene. Wing was indifferent. He twirled his Hi-Tecpoint restlessly and scribbled the date at the corner of his foolscap pad.

The lecture was about the New Order of Suharto in Indonesia in the seventies. Mr Böll, the expatriate lecturer, was striding across the room with a passion so convincing it made one feel that he had been there and seen it all himself. History always held a fascination for Wing. The study of past events gave one an odd assurance. It gave everyone a chance at immortality. Yet, one had to be exceptional in one’s society. The millions of factory workers and clerks and managers and lesser leaders just faded into oblivion within a generation.

Even himself, Wing thought. And probably everyone else in the room.

The rojak, which they always ordered to share when they ate at that market, came first. Shamkumar picked out a chunk of *yu char kway*, thick with prawn paste.

“So how’s the play coming along, Wing?” Sham asked.

“You going?” Wing enquired.

“No lah. You know I’m not into all this arty stuff. Anyway, tickets damn expensive, right?”

“Not sure. Why don’t you ask Audrey? I’m only doing the lighting.”

Audrey shook her head. “I think it’s below ten dollars. They tried to book Victoria Theatre but it was too expensive and I think it was being used for the Festival of Arts rehearsals.” Audrey Neo was one of the supporting actresses. She was a plain girl, her skin darker than tanned because of her netball practices. Wing couldn’t remember distinctly the first time that they met. She was in his tutorial group and had somehow begun to pass time at their table in the canteen and to follow them for lunches at the nearby market.

“Then, what about smaller locations?”

“You mean like Guinness Theatre?” Wing asked.

“No, that’s too small,” Audrey pointed out. “But you would like it wouldn’t you, Wing? I bet the control panel is much simpler to operate there.” Wing shrugged. He didn’t know. “Maybe somewhere like Drama Centre, you know,” Audrey went on. “Smaller but with all the facilities.”

Sham’s Hokkien mee arrived. Hot, fragrant and piled to the edge of the plate. It was interesting to be around Sham. He took Chinese as a second language and was more comfortable with fried carrot cake than *murtabak*. Wing had met his mother. Rotund and loud, she spoke the best Cantonese he had ever heard. Sham explained that his mother had been fostered out to an old Chinese nanny when she was a baby. Mrs Nathan liked to shock people by chatting fluently in the dialect at the dispensary where she worked. Once, when Wing and the rest visited during Deepavali, she even showed off her knowledge of Cantonese swear phrases!

Wing heard his name being called out and whirled around.

It was his neighbour, Mrs Ow, smiling and nodding to Wing's friends. "Your mum told me to tell you to go home if I see you," she said. "Are these your classmates?" Wing nodded even though Sham wasn't. He knew that Mrs Ow was just being polite.

"Better go," Audrey encouraged. "I'll see you at the rehearsal."

Wing resented the proximity between his college and home at times like that.

"Ma?" Wing said as he stepped into his dark three-room flat. The only light filtering in came from the kitchen windows with a view of the opposite block. The grilles had been welded off after his mother complained that it was difficult to pull the long laundry-laden bamboo poles into the house. He peered into his mother's room. She lay on her side in her samfoo, her back to the door. The air reeked of medicated oil. "Ma?"

"Ah Wing..." She propped herself up with some difficulty.

"What is it, Ma?"

"I want you to buy 4-D for me," she said in Mandarin.

"Why didn't you ask Mrs Ow?" Wing replied, slightly irritated.

"Then she would know my numbers, you stupid egg."

"What's the hurry? I'm having lessons, you know."

"I know, but it's already Thursday and next week is Qing Ming. Must pray to your father. Have you forgotten?" He had forgotten. "I'm sure that when I die, you won't remember when to pay respects to me as well."

Wing took a guilty glance at the wedding portrait of his parents, folded the numbers and dropped them into his pocket. He decided that he would go to the Toto stand on his way back from the rehearsal that afternoon.

Wing made sure that all the spotlights were on.

The backstage team was pasting masking tape on the floorboards while the actors, perspiration forming over thick make-up, stood at the edge listening intently to their director. Audrey wore a nice Victorian-style dress with lace and frills.

Wing slumped deeper into the seat, his feet propped up. The lighting was to stay the same for at least three scenes and the one being rehearsed seemed not to be getting anywhere. Everybody was focused totally on the cast and that was the way Wing liked it. Forgotten and not needed. He stayed at the back, taking in the flurry of excitement around him.

Everyone took themselves too seriously, he felt. It was a school play but no one involved in the production was willing to admit that the audience wasn't going to be there to appreciate the drama. They were there to support their friends. They were there to whisper, "Hey, that's Maniam!" and "Isn't that Siew Geok? Look at the powder on her hair. It's so funny! Look—it's coming off!" If something went wrong, people would laugh and it would be a shared joke. They would try to remember it long enough to tease their friends about it.

"All right, one more time, people," Mr Deepak shouted. The curtains crawled slowly together, its maroon velvet turning pale under the glare of the spotlight.

Wing noticed a book a few seats away from him. It was by Philip Larkin. He picked it up and flipped through the first few pages. "Do you like poetry?" someone asked.

Wing looked up. It was a familiar face—one of the stagehands. "I'm sorry, I was just looking," Wing said as he put the book back on the chair.

"No, go ahead. No problem. But do you?"

“Do I what?”

“Like poetry.”

“Oh, yes,” Wing replied. “I mean I don’t really know much about it besides what I study... but, yes, I do like it. And you?”

“Well, I guess I do.”

“Who do you like?”

“I’m not sure... I’m pretty open. I like Seamus Heaney, Rabindranath Tagore... but recently I’ve become quite interested in Lee Tzu Pheng’s early works.”

“Lee Tzu Pheng? Who’s that... is she local?”

“Yeah. She’s written quite a lot of books, you know. I’ll lend you some if you like.”

Before Wing could thank him, a voice on stage called for half-light. Wing gestured that he understood. They couldn’t see him and shouted again. They must have decided to rehearse a later scene, he thought. Wing excused himself. Once inside the sound room, he heard an even louder holler. Sounded like Mr Deepak, impatient and questioning, asking him to wake up. Wing found the button and moved it.

The bright stage collapsed abruptly into the surrounding dimness.

Audrey put aside her history textbook, removed her earphones and leaned against the pillar behind her. Straightaway, she felt the afternoon hum of the canteen. The layer of indistinct voices and utensil sounds wrapped around her, broken occasionally by distant instructions shouted by the rugby players on the pitch.

The canteen table they occupied was one they guarded with jealous territoriality. Their staggered timetables meant that there was always someone there finishing tutorials or waiting for the

next lesson. It could have been worse for Wing and his friends if they didn’t have one another. Coming mostly from neighbourhood secondary schools, they had worked hard to get into the top college in the country only to find themselves outsiders to traditions they were welcomed into but which could never be in their blood. They were like migrants whose badges of belonging are awkwardly worn, whose pride is borrowed rather than historical. And like migrants, they carved a little niche for themselves like the Chinatowns and little Italys that spring up all over the world.

“What are you reading, Wing?”

“Huh? Oh, nothing. Just some poetry by Larkin. Heard of him?”

“No. Is it for your S-paper Lit?”

“Nope,” Wing shook his head. “One of the stagehands Joshua lent it to me at the rehearsal yesterday.” He closed the book and looked at its cover. “I guess it might help. Have you seen the exam paper?”

“I don’t know. Don’t ask me about Lit. You’re the literary one. I hate the subject. I don’t know what possessed me to choose Arts. Should have taken Commerce instead. Then next time I can be Businesswoman of the Year!”

They both laughed.

Wing let his chuckle trail off. What did he want to do? He never really thought about the future. Thinking about something doesn’t make it better if it’s not good and not thinking about it doesn’t make it worse, he always told himself. But in the last month, especially with the surrounding excitement over NS, he had begun to see a part of his future taking shape before him. Two and a half years—a quarter of a decade! Such a long time! The future will take care of itself, Wing decided.

“What are you thinking about?” Audrey asked.

“Nothing.”

“And you expect me to believe you?” she said, smiling.

She knew him rather well. Wing admitted to himself. “Can I have some?” Wing asked as he reached for her packet of preserved tamarinds.

“Sure, but not too much...” she teased, mimicking a TV advertisement. “Oh,” she said as she threw the packet at him, “your favourite girl is here.”

“Who?” Wing turned around.

“Who else?” Audrey said, looking away. “Chloe Tam lah. The Green girl.”

The environmental club was giving out flyers in the canteen. Wing had seen posters on animal abuse around the college for over a week.

Chloe was a Humanities scholar. One of those groomed by the PSC for Oxford or Cambridge. She had a sophisticated air that attracted Wing tremendously. Chloe was poised and confident and yet had an alluring unpredictability about her. Once, Wing had gone to watch a foreign film at the Picturehouse alone and noticed, as he was entering the hall, that she and a friend were in the audience. They bumped into each other when heading for the toilets after it ended. He was deciding on the right door to enter when she came up to him and whispered, “Sean Connery.” The male toilet door, unlabelled, had the actor’s picture on it. He was embarrassed but charmed. Yet, they were not formally introduced so that when he saw her again in college, they avoided each other with a knowing awkwardness.

The canteen was empty and it was a matter of time before Chloe walked over to their table. They smiled and she gave them a pamphlet each. Printed on brown recycled paper, it had a picture of a sea lion and the bold words “I Hurt Like You Do”.

“Greenwatch is holding an animal abuse seminar next week,” she said to both of them.

“You mean about animal testing and all that?” Audrey asked pointedly.

“Exactly.” Chloe smiled again. “What cosmetics do you use?”

“Why?” Audrey’s voice thickened.

“We’re getting some people from the cosmetics industry to come down. They’ll give their point of view and we’ll have an open floor session. Come and air your views, Wing Seng. I’d really like to hear what you think.”

Wing looked at the pamphlet. “Next Friday, is it?” he asked, as he glanced at his watch in the unnecessary way people do when talking about the near future.

She nodded and smiled. “I’ll come and watch your play,” she promised as she turned to leave.

The computer whirred quietly in protest as Sham logged on. All the lights were off as everyone had gone to sleep. He had to wait till the phone-line was free before he could hook up his modem. His usual IRC site was busy. All his friends were there: Geberra, Spinoza, Dr Feelgood and Yin.

He got his own nickname because of Yin, the first person he spoke to on the Internet.

<Is Yin in the white or the black symbol?>

She was confused and, instead, told him that her name was Su Yin.

<A many-splendoured thing?>

<I would like to think so>

They hit it off immediately. Whenever they were logged on together, they would talk endlessly, sometimes retreating into

private conversations for hours. Sham always wondered what Yin looked like. He imagined that he knew. Once, at about 4am, he suggested meeting for breakfast in the morning but she thought it was not a good idea. Sham dropped the “g” from his nickname ‘Yang’ because he wanted to be a symmetrical reflection of Yin. But there were those in his chat room who thought that he got his name from a television personality.

<So, can you cook?>

<The only thing that I can cook up is a name—which I see has already gotten your attention>

<Are you Chinese?>

<Why? Do you want to take me out?>

<Then you must be!>

<Was Marco Polo Chinese?>

The friendships made on the Internet had no obligations. He turned up when he wished and exited when he needed to. Sometimes, they delved into topics like God which could take forever and tire everyone. But, often, they just talked about everything under the sun.

Yin was not around. Just as he was about to reply to Geberra, he heard the panes rattling with the threat of rain. Sham went round the house to close the windows.

Before he returned to his table, Sham took out an umbrella from his cupboard. He placed it next to the keyboard so that he would see it in the morning before logging out and leaving for school.

III

RIVER VALLEY ROAD was empty for a Saturday night.

Eugene Seah took a deep breath as he made a U-turn and then swerved into Jiak Kim Street. Tucked away in a quiet corner, it was once known only to coolies who moved cargo at the surrounding warehouses. Now, the children of those people the coolies worked for spent their money on the lights and sounds which it housed.

No parking, he thought to himself. Shiny BMWs, Alfa Romeos and the odd Porsche were displayed along the double yellow lines.

Crawling at first gear, he looked out for friends in the queue. Doors to the Zouk discotheque opened at eight. Yet, no one from the hip crowd would turn up until half past ten. And when they did, they would cause such a long line that it would snake all the way to the pavement outside. Being in line was part of the attraction—it showed that one was not too eager to get in, that one was cool enough to wait, that one’s life started only when the rest of the world had finished watching *News Five Tonight* and were beginning to turn in. More importantly, it allowed the clubbers to look and be looked at. The whole idea of dressing up for the night was lost when one could not be seen.

Eugene drove over to the housing estate opposite and found a lot.

“Hey, young man,” a voice rang out as Eugene stepped out of his car. It was a neat middle-aged man in shorts, carrying a loaf

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