

***Loss Adjustment* by Linda Collins Book Launch at The Moon**

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Full Audio Transcript

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Suning (Editor): I guess I will just start since there's a natural silence. Thank you so much to everyone for coming, thank you for your patience. It gives me great pleasure to introduce both of them. Akshita is a novelist, but just a recent while ago she was a former colleague of Linda. And I know that today among the audience, there are many of you who are also colleagues of Linda and Akshita, and many of you have known Victoria as well. So without further ado, I would like to introduce both of them.

Akshita: Hi everyone, I am so glad to see this amazing turnout for Linda's first book—first of many, I hope. I was just telling her how rare it is that people turn up so early for a book launch which is supposed to start at 4:30 but that just goes to show how extraordinary *Loss Adjustment* is. It's a book that I've described the writing being as like a scalpel because it cuts so perfectly, and these are cuts that are made in the psyche towards a greater healing. I don't want to say very much about the book because I'm hoping all of you will read it and no doubt will talk about it.

I do want to say, however, that almost exactly 10 years ago, I met Linda for the first time. I had just moved over to the Lifestyle desk and she was a copy editor cutting up a scalpel into my own work. And you know, here's the thing: that I've been an editor in publishing, I've written scientific papers, and textbooks, and to have somebody edit my writing was obviously very traumatic. So as writers do when they're a little too precious, I cornered her in the ladies room—obviously she wasn't going to run away—and I tried to tell her what I had been trying to do with that particular piece. And she just looked at me and said, “Well, it didn't work. (laughs) Up. Your. Game.”

Linda: I said that to you? Oh god.

Akshita: Thanks to that, I now have two novels, one of which has been shortlisted for two prizes—so you know. She works. (laughs) Linda has given so many journalists a voice or helped them find theirs. It's a real privilege for me to have watched as she discovered her own voice for her own first novel, *Loss Adjustment*. It is an extraordinary book, Linda's an extraordinary person. Every time I read the pages, the writing is just so simple but there's deeper layers. Just because something is simple and accessible, doesn't mean that it isn't the culmination of a wonderful, powerful truth. It takes a lot of talent and a lot of skill to be able to write something like this when no word is extraneous and every word means something. And it's so interesting that you're all here today in this wonderful bookstore over here. Because of course, Mosque Street has a special meaning for Linda—could you share a bit about that?

Linda: Yes, it was a bit of a shock turning into Mosque Street. It took me back to 2015, and trying to find some way out of Victoria's death and that grief. And so, I began to go to many different churches in Singapore. And not just Christian churches. I visited Chulia Mosque on the corner here, and Green Mosque. I'd forgotten I'd done that. That had been actually very helpful to me to be shown around and taken for tea, and to have my questions about Islam— to be able to ask these questions and to be able to be told about it, and just the warmth and love I felt in that building. I went on to some other organised religions but it was the start of feeling a lot of love from complete strangers to finding a lot of goodness in Singapore that really gave me a hand on it.

Eventually I didn't have a choice, really, in where I ended up. I went to St Ignatius Church one day, and I know it sounds far-fetched but I felt my daughter tell me, "Mum you'll feel safe here." There are some women from St Ignatius Bible study group here today so I'd like to thank them for that. So it just also reminds me of the person I was back in 2015—I was just broken. And while I'm still broken today, I feel a lot more positive about going forward and I think I understand a bit more about myself and a bit more about people—and especially come to have a much deeper love for Singaporeans beyond the cliches and the tropes.

Akshita: As we all know, and all of you who are here in this room know that Linda wrote *Loss Adjustment*, adjusting to some very very traumatic losses in her own life. One of the reasons we are having this event today, which was by invite only and limited to this lovely space over here, is because it's also a memorial; it's remembering of Victoria, which is the reason this book was written. Could you talk about that?

Linda: It sort of goes back to the voice thing, and I found a voice with this. And one of the good things about that is that Victoria didn't have a voice. This is something to look out for if you've got troubled ones at home or if you may have been experiencing this yourself. Victoria was full of laughter and really chatty and quite witty, we often have a laugh. But I didn't know at school she couldn't speak up, she was paralysed by fear. I only found that out when we insisted on getting the school counsellor's notes, we didn't even know she was seeing the counsellor. So after she died, we put pressure on the school and eventually they gave us these notes and it was very heart-breaking to read that Victoria actually plucked up the courage, one teacher was picking on her and she couldn't reply and picked on her more and more, and that just drove her more into this. She actually plucked up the courage to complain to the school but the teacher made a joke of it in class to the other kids.

And then we found her diaries—I keep forgetting the extent—7 or 8 months after she died, the police handed us back Victoria's laptop. I think you'll read it in the book. Answering Akshita's question: we were told by the police there was nothing of interest in this laptop. But I felt it was. So Malcolm, my husband, he managed to get it open for me and there was this gift to us. All these

months later of Victoria's journals which comprised the last four months of her life until two weeks before she died. And she had a very confident voice, wanted to get out there, also hear about what she was going through.

On the subject of her shyness which crippled her, which she recognised as social anxiety—she read up on that quite a bit. She expressed in the diary that she wanted some research to be done into social anxiety. A charity, one that raises awareness about social anxiety—because God it needs to be. I don't want other kids who feel like freaks that way not to be aware of it. So that teachers don't always assume that the kid at the back of the class, never raises their hand, isn't just shy— when they're really paralysed by fear and hopelessness, that they believe no one could ever understand.

This book is giving her that voice, and sometimes I feel like I never wrote it, that I was just a conduit. So some of the chapters, they just flow through my hands and it was her telling me what to write. It seems illogical but that's what it felt like. Today is kind of mixed feelings for me because now I've let that book out into the world and it's in your hands, hands of strangers, and I just ask you to be tender with that. Of course I can't control what happens but she's out in the world that way and she's got that voice.

Akshita: I know you believe that this is Victoria's book even more than it is your own, but I still remember the first bit that you shared with me, and I think it is the reading you have chosen to present today, if you're up for it. I can't actually remember what it was; but Linda and I, though we work in the same newsroom, sitting across from each other and having coffee is relatively rare because we're all so busy so we communicate a lot through emails. And we were just communicating back and forth, and she said I've written this thing and I said I'd read it and then I read it and—I was employed for several years as a literary critic and I, after reading it, had no words. It is very rare that a piece of writing says everything that your reviewer can really find nothing to say, but that's what this piece of writing did. And Linda if you're up for it, will you read that?

Linda: It's a short extract from the book, I know sometimes readings can go on and on. Even when you love what you hear. So this a short chapter, just bear with me. Although it's difficult subject matter, I'm actually really going to enjoy sharing it with you. So make yourself comfortable, or as comfortable as you can, and just sit with me this 3 or 4 minutes. This chapter is called Not Ash, it is chapter 10 in the book.

“Two days later, Malcolm and I enter a small side room of the left lobby of the Singapore Casket Company. It's on a different floor to the one for the three-day wake. Unlike that room, this room has windows. Sun streams in. An Indian man wearing overalls stands next to a plastic bag on the table. Seeing us he looks startled. The funeral parlour does not get many Westerners taking up one of its

traditional Chinese style funeral and cremation packages. However he squares his shoulders, and beckons us with dignity. He nods to a box next to a plastic bag. The colour of the box is an audacious orange of a Hermes wrapping as if it contains some overpriced frippery. However, it contains the marble urn we ordered yesterday for \$162. Francis helped us select it. "Go for the middle-range. Too expensive is a waste of money," he had advised, his migrant- descendant frugality an offering of love. We, innocents in this business, and with family in another country had been grateful. The cremation package we chose included the category ash collection". The man in overalls is a worker from the Cremations Centre where the funeral was held. We realise this now " (the rest of Chapter 10)

Akshita: We need a minute. So it is after reading this that I decided to describe Linda's writing as a scalpel. It cuts you really deep and you have absolutely no idea how deep. But it's incredible, and I'm assuming this is one of the bits that just sort of flowed out of you? Or was it one of the bits that required more editing?

Linda: No that wrote itself.

Akshita: I imagine it would. The words are very fluid. The rhythm of the sentences, the way it just sweeps the reader away. And now after almost two years, more than a year definitely, I think I am able to sort of analyse the text in a way I couldn't. Because I read this way before you guys and I have a bit of emotional distance from it. What's absolutely amazing to me is how you've brought together so many different levels of questioning, belonging and identity. You've brought in the multicultural nature of this setting, you and Malcolm, the worker at the crematorium, the colleague who is also of migrant descent, and in so many ways, this book is a book giving a voice and a space to belong to somebody who felt like she didn't quite have it here all the time. I just love how this particular extract encompasses everything Linda manages to achieve with the book. It's absolutely incredible. Thank you for it.

Linda: Thanks for your kind words on writing it. I'm just someone who flinches from praise. So let me think about what it might mean for people here. So many of you would've been to those funeral parlours and been through the process. And so do forgive the outsider, trying to make sense of it all and sometimes stumbling. But in western society, it's more normal that a wake is held after the funeral, and it's usually just a few hours, a small gathering. And you wouldn't have the elaborate choices of the urn, whether it was ash or ... bones. So all these things are new but on the other hand, I was very grateful for the process because it still allowed me to have a physical contact with my daughter and to be able to keep those. So I don't know what it's like for you guys if you've gone through that. It's quite a harrowing many days you know. The nearest we've got in New Zealand are the indigenous Maori people who were originally from Southeast Asia. So they have an approach to death where the body is carried into the meeting house and must be disposed of within the day, but there's a lot of grieving over three days and communal food, that sort of thing. It's a lot to ponder on that. For the writing part of it, with my writerly hat on, I was interested in

exploring the different worlds of that community because when you're starting to get in that spiritual zone and yet here you've got physical contact with the person still and you're also culturally outside your comfort zone. So there's a lot happening in that little piece.

Akshita: So talk a bit about the title, 'Loss Adjustment'.

Linda: Well hopefully most of you people here are lucky enough not to have been in an earthquake and have your house ripped, unless you're from Indonesia... So I had a house in Christchurch—Ken Hickson over there used to live in Christchurch so he knows about the place. There was an earthquake in 2011 and the house we bought there to be one day our family home should things go awry in Singapore—foreigners fall out of favour, kicked out, whatever, you live in fear, and then I've picked up on Lee Kuan Yew's fear, we live on a house of shifting sands, boy was he right, but it was about Christchurch.

So that house was destroyed and so I had the process of many years dealing with insurance. I hope you never have the misfortune of dealing with insurance. It's sort of boring technical thing but you might have had a car accident and experienced the difficulty of getting the insurance to honour your policy. So for me they had 10,000 houses so they wanted to minimise the payouts. So they quite ruthlessly tried to destroy the claimants, make you have breakdowns so you'll just go away and sign for a small sum. So they did that to me and being in another country it was quite difficult.

So the title for Loss Adjustment—just before Victoria died, a stress that I encountered was we were assigned a new loss adjuster. So a loss adjuster is a person who calculates what the insurance should compensate you for your house. The adjustment is usually to favour the insurer, of course I didn't know that. So just before Victoria died we were assigned a new one, and when I googled her I just about died because she had a reputation for viciousness. In fact a closed Facebook was set up by a person who had a mental breakdown dealing with her. She was known as the Rottweiler of loss adjustments. So this really stressed me out that she was trying to minimise this. I don't know anything about insurance! And I google the stuff I don't know and I don't know how to build a house. There's things called twangs and nails and all sorts of stuff and here I was trying to deal with that. So the house became a metaphor in the book. So loss adjustment is about, you know, the financially quantifying the loss of a house, versus the loss of a person which you can never quantify. And both are nesting inside each other in the book.

Akshita: So I remember just after the earthquake and you had a face like thunder and you were bent over your laptop. There's poor Linda having to copy edit these very objective stories about something that she has not exactly lived through but that she has to deal with the aftermath of it and I remember thinking then that you're probably going to end up writing a book about your house and about the earthquake. When did you start writing this?

Linda: When did I start writing the book—well actually I had no intention of writing any book. I did some columns about the earthquake on the Expat files thing that I used to do and to my surprise one day when I was looking at my CPF page there was my story up as a cautionary measure to how not to get into debt.

So I was going about trying to find purpose in my life so I did a diploma in learning disorders management to try and understand my daughter's problems and more—and my own issues. To try to find out who I was, where did I let her down, as a mother, as a person. I did a 6-month course; I think Michelle is here from it. That person there, was wonderful. We belonged to a group; we called ourselves the Dramatic Pause, and we did a 6-month course in speech and drama at the Julia Gabriel Centre so that was in the evenings and there was a bunch of young people, young Singaporeans who just took me into their arms and we just did a lot of improv theatre, speech, singing together; there were some very talented rappers in the group. To this day I'm afraid I can't clap in time but, you know, they were good. So a lot of trying to discover some purpose. So I also was at St Ignatius Church and I was in the middle of a non-residential 3 day retreat, dedicated myself to Mother Mary. That's a lot of reflection and it's under the De Montfort framework, the saint; so a lot of reading. But halfway through there was this bit about listening to the inner voice. And I'm one of these people who'd like to set goals and plan ahead, makes list, external focus. And I didn't really listen to my inner voice so I began to try again to listen to that voice.

And also De Montfort spoke about making the most of your God-given talents so I had to try to think, well what am I good at? Writing. The inner voice. Various things happened with that inner voice which I won't go through here. But one of them was: it was either my inner voice, but it sounded a lot like my daughter Victoria, and one day that voice said to me, "Mum, Google creative writing New Zealand". So I did, and up popped this quite well-respected course at the International Institute of Modern Letters at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand. And it said that it had just closed for their May applicants but something said go on apply. So I messaged them and they messaged back straight away saying, it's so strange you just messaged now, we're just choosing our applicants. If you send us 5000 words by tomorrow morning we'll look at that and consider it. I had the, 'Not Ash', which was just 500 words, so I sat down and the stuff just poured out, and I sent it off. And the next day I got an email—"You're accepted for this course". It's quite a difficult course to go into; and it means going and living in New Zealand. I hadn't any plans or thoughts but I thought I must do this. Luckily The Straits Times was helpful and I can still work remotely for them 3 nights a week. I went and lived in student halls at my age, late 50s, which was great actually! Noisy but great. In a little room, like kind of a monk room or nun or something. So I went to these workshops and my book was the MA Thesis.

Akshita: I'm just really curious as to whether there were any other influences on you; like were you only writing or was there anything you were reading very widely around the same time or drawing other things that you had read in the past.

Linda: Now that's a difficult question because, first of all—you don't need to put your hands up but do if you want to, but is there anyone here grief-stricken, or has suffered trauma?—So um what it does to you, it affects you cognitively. And you lose some quick-thinking ability. You get some of it back but you have short attention span and one of the things is, with me, I still find it hard to read fiction. I can't sit and read a book—fictional book—because, A) I can't concentrate much, and B) particularly with fiction, it's fake death. And you only want reality, you don't want made up things because you've seen how cruel life is and how things can change very quickly. How there's not much comfort in fake stories for you. So I haven't done much reading of fiction to influence me. But you, you Akshita, how lucky I was to have her as a colleague at that time in the Life department because you recommended a book to me. I'll just look up the title of it.

Akshita: Oh yes. Letters to Aly.

Linda: The Samaritans here have a book that they've put out and it's called Letters to Aly and it's by Lee-Ann: surviving my best friend forever's (BFF) suicide. That was someone's real story and it was just from the heart. Someone who was only in her teens writing this book. I felt, someone understands what I'm going through, and this is really helpful. And actually I made time to meet her at a Samaritans gathering on World Suicide Prevention day. So it was kind of really a comforting thing for all of us. So that's one particular book I read.

But in terms of the actual book, so I didn't just want to be just an outpouring just meant for family, I wanted it to be a book, to stand on its own two feet, to go out to the world, to honour Victoria, to give her voice, but it also had to work as a book. So I read a lot of memoir during that year. So books that influenced me were Joan Didion, *The Year Of Magical Thinking* and also *Blue Nights*, about her daughter. Joan Didion journals at the Hollywood Scriptwriter. *The Re-enactments* by a writer called Nick Flynn. So he'd already written one memoir, and do forgive me, the abrupt title, *Another Bullshit Night In Suck City*, about his alcoholic father. So he also had a troubled mother who took her own life. His book, *The Re-enactments* was about the bizarre process of him watching a film being made about his mother's death. And watching the actress Julianne Moore kill herself over and over again, and he's sitting in the seat and he analyses that process really interestingly, kind of quite detached from a terribly heartfelt thing. That was good. Two other books—Marion Coutts who was a punk singer from the 80s. Her husband was a Guardian writer and he died a horrible death from cancer, a cancerous tumour. And her book is called *The Iceberg* and she kind of weaves in her punk viewpoint with helping her husband and his death. And the other one is *All At Sea* by Decca Aitkenhead. Her husband drowning while swimming with her son. So the things

I learnt from that which was technique for example. Like with things, what you leave out as well as put in. So for the All At Sea person, her husband was a bit of naughty boy. He was a Jack the Lad and he did some nasty things to that family. It actually made him more human and the book more readable because she didn't flinch from that. In Joan Didion's book *Blue Nights*, and also *The Year Of Magical Thinking*, which I keep thinking of my year of magical drinking (laughs), she never really goes into the reasons why her daughter died. It's this delicate dance of what you leave in and what you leave out.

Also Suning, my editor, raised some very good points about how it's kind of presumptuous to speak for the dead because they can't really speak for themselves, so it was a real ethical thing I wrestled with. But in Victoria's case, I wanted to give her a voice and I felt like she guided me with her journals but it was a very good point that you made, thanks.

Akshita: Victoria loved the Potterverse yes?

Linda: Oh yeah. Do forgive me I have to read out. While her diaries were sort of heart-breaking in a lot of places or revelatory or comforting, also I got to know my own daughter a lot better. Teenagers hide a lot of themselves from you today; I don't know how many of you are parents here, or how many of you are older people coming out of a turbulent youth. But there's a lot that's hidden. Our daughter had this very dark side to her that I came to know in the journal. But also she had a really great take on herself that was funny at times. So this is an example of that voice. This is her describing herself:

"I am a Potterhead. My favourite movies are Harry Potter, Loving Annabelle, Inception, The Lord Of The Rings, The Fall and The Perks Of Being A Wallflower. My favourite desserts are chocolate soufflé or pumpkin pie. I always eat food clockwise around the plate. Starting with what I like the least and ending with what I like the most. I hate talking to people, except my relatives on the phone."

So that's a glimpse into her, Potterhead. I don't know, with those of you who love Harry Potter: one of Victoria's worries was what do you do when you outgrow Harry Potter. I haven't heard that addressed properly yet.

Akshita: You said something earlier about the books that you read, that they taught you technique. And the thing is, I know you as the person who teaches technique to writers. So being an editor—and honestly an editor of amazing calibre, The Straits Times is lucky to have her—what was it like being a writer? Were you worst critic? Did you have to switch brains?

Linda: Well for a start I wish I had...—I am my own worst editor. And now I feel very sorry for journalists who are edited by me (laughs), I cut them a lot more slack. Yeah, I think I was very hard on people before. That's a really difficult question to answer, because for the writing, creative writing, the workshops I did at the MA were very good. I was with a bunch of poets. There were only 2 memoirs in the course. The rest were poets—three had already gone on to publish poetry books and be hailed as poets in the Poetry Foundation. So these were people who gave me a new way of looking at words. Wow they just... To write well, you have to get rid of the editor. It just destroys you, in fact I wish I could walk away from my editing job cause it really is a handicap to writing well. You wanna get that little pesky critic, you want it to just go away, then just get it on the page then see how you can... what bits are interesting, that leap out to you. So one of the things that's helping me now is that I'm trying a new genre of poetry. I got into that about last year. First of all, doing a course at de LaSalle, and then doing courses with Gotham in New York, online.

So about your question of technique—so I didn't want to write it in conventional narrative. You know, I'm just so sick of writing to newspaper formula, the way they suck you in, you have a snappy intro, then big broad statement, then a quote! Ugh! Yeah I hate that! I never want to write like that again. I'm sorry, people who still do. (laughs)

And it's the killing of creativity, and it's also the moulding of your minds to make you think a certain way, to make you not question things. Whereas the creative writing process you are allowing room for the reader to come in and you're allowing them to make their own interpretation of bits. So I know that when you read my book there are things you will see in a very different way to me. Things that will anger you, or think "How could she not see?" or "Oh I didn't know that..." and that's what I want. And the book is also written not as a conventional narrative structure. You can read it all the way through if you want, but I also realised it's too harrowing in parts. It's too raw. You might have to just put it down. And that's okay. You can skip straight to the end if you like, which you should never really tell readers to do, but apparently no, I'm fine if you do that. When you find a bit in the book that has a message for you, or there are some bits in the book that sort of are slightly humorous. My colleagues all laughed at the reference of Yoga as Yoda, who's not like the Star Wars character at all. Then there's a chapter I wrote in there, set in Starbucks that's set up for you, if you just had enough and you need some light relief. It's about a guy who met me in Starbucks to tell me how to move on in my life. He meant well but he really had no idea of the effect of death on someone. Sitting at the Starbucks commenting... so there's that. And I have been criticised by some people and on some courses for not having a wow-look-at-me intro. So I deliberately did this to say—if you've ever been to creative writing class, the first thing you'll be told is never open up a book or short story with someone being at home and getting up in the morning. So that's exactly what I did. Just gives me a little vision to start the bit, you know, and that's how things unfolded.

Akshita: Can you take questions?

Linda: Yes, yes.

Akshita: On this note, this is the bit where the readers are invited to come in. Linda will take questions and I can see you upstairs as well if you want to raise your hands and ask. I would ask you to just think about what you're saying, think about your question before you ask it, so you know, we don't have to hear you thinking about it (laughs). So please, we would like to open it to the floor and to the balcony for questions. Raise your hands, stand up, whatever it is, we can hear you. Who is first? Anyone from upstairs?

Audience member (Ken): I know, obviously, what you've been through, and ... I do wonder whether at some stage, you saw the writing of the book therapeutic in some way. Was it a distraction from the grief you went through, or did it help you get through it? Was it a process that you found beneficial, or was it just a task you had to do?

Linda: Yeah, that's an interesting question, and if any of you ever write a similar book like this, I wonder if, like me, you'll get so annoyed at being asked: was this cathartic or helpful? I know it's a good question, because people really want you to get better. It's not something you can get better from. And it didn't heal me in any way—in fact, writing of the thing in the MA was in a way a complete ordeal. I was trying to still work for The Straits Times, I was living in a different country. That was the year 68 Oxley Road happened. So it was all that stuff happening; more to do—again, property rears its head! So there was that, and also Wellington, and also having lived in Singapore quite a long time, I found that I acted a different way to a lot of the Westerners in my group. It was just New Zealand had changed quite a bit, so I didn't fit in with that society easily. So it wasn't healing, but I've now come to realise, now the book is written—actually, what does healing mean? It's the book going out into the world, and doing its own healing.

Akshita: Just before anybody else asks a question, I do have something that I think I would like Linda to share about, if you feel up to it. Finding this book a home was a bit difficult—could you talk a bit about that?

Linda: Yeah, actually, Felix Cheong was here just before... he's got an interesting thread on Facebook at the moment. I think he's the first Singaporean writer I've encountered. He set up a thread on rejections he is getting. And he's going, "Ya I have 17 rejections so far, over a period of a year." And he's named the organisations and publishers who rejected him. [Everybody laughs.]

Sorry, I think one of them is Ethos Books. Very generous of him to do that, actually. Because you think of success stories, and Felix is a very established writer; why would he have trouble getting grants or getting his book published? But that's the grim reality, even for successful writers; it's a rejection process. It's wonderful that he set that thing up. And I said yeah, I'm going for the 100. Because actually, interesting article in LitHub magazine, about why writers should aim for 100 rejections over the space of one year. Loss Adjustment; first of all accepted; because I had a kind of weird ... around it at first that was really fake. So the book was finished at the end of 2017, and January 2018 I was shortlisted for the Hachette Trans-Tasmanian mentorship. I got the kind of call you dream of. So the publisher called me directly, said "You didn't win because we think you don't need mentorship, we want to see the book." So I sent it to them, I got the publisher saying, "it's the kind of manuscript publishers dream of getting", "We'll put it to the acquisitions meeting." She started the process of doing that, and I thought I better get an agent. I didn't know any agents at all. So a year or so before, a friend in Britain had given me a list of agents he knew. So I thought, well I'll just work my way through the agents.

So it was the Sunday. So I messaged the first one on the list. And to my horror, she replied within one hour, saying "I want to be your agent." Really, it was a bit of a whirlwind. But, what happened was, A) my book got turned down at the acquisitions meeting because the marketing men couldn't see how to market it in Australia, and also, I wasn't in Australia to help promote it, which is apparently really important. And the other reason was, they often sell a lot of their books in Australia in the supermarkets these days, and my book would not sit well there. The agent, turned out, without my knowledge, being already going around London offering my book around, because she had thought that I would be, a sweet sure deal with her shit. And it was an agent's cut she didn't have to work for. And she kind of was, a crook! So, I lost that agent, I lost her shit, and I start again. A lot more wiser about the business side of this.

And so, Straits Press, at the time Soo Long was the managing editor, and she was interested, and she read it, and she loved it. And that was a great relief to me, because I was worried about the sensitivity of it, because I'm a foreigner, basically, writing about things in Singapore, and we can't be seen to be meddling. But I think we can be seen to be observing, and connecting. Anyway, she wanted to get it, and then I started to get bad dreams—sounds nuts—I really was uncomfortable with it. And I just felt it wasn't the right home for this book, you know, although they've been really lovely to me. And I had a dream about this industrial complex with a tennis court behind it, and me driving up to it. And I thought, somehow, that's the place for me. Don't know where that is. And then next day, Felix, whom I only have ever known on Facebook—today was the first day I actually met him—he messaged me, "Have you thought about submitting to Ethos?" So I thought, "Oh, that's an idea, they're a good publisher," so I just cold-submitted it. They've got a little submit button, and I filled in the stuff and I sent it off. And, Kah Gay—are you up there? He's up there with the gods (laughs), his rightful place. He read the book, and he liked it, and he

wanted to know more. And so, when I drove there for my first meeting, Ethos Books is in an industrial estate next to a view of a tennis court behind it.

Akshita: So a lot of lessons there, including trust the inner voice.

Linda: Yes, yes yes.

Akshita: Questions for the floor—yes please?

Audience member: Hi Linda. (Linda: Hi Vlad!) How are you? (Linda: Good, thanks.) I've got two questions. First would be: now that the book is done and published, do you feel that, is it a complete representation of how you view Victoria, or do you feel that there are the bits that are not quite in there, ... The second question would be, do you feel that the book is kind of like your clarion call, or do you have a message of the book, towards families, parents, and kids, about mental health?

Linda: Yes, thank you—I'll answer that first question first. This is Vladimir Guevarra, and we were colleagues on Straits Times for a long time, and Vlad moved to Britain and he's been in corp comms and worked for banks. And he's always been a friend, and in the office, one of those people who's got a lot of energy, and very sharing, a great writer. So thanks for your question. And I didn't pay him to ask that.

Vlad, so, the first one—yes, there's a lot more to know about Victoria, and I've come to know how little I knew of her. And one of the things I'm really sad about, apart from not knowing the extent of her suffering, was I didn't realise what a writer she was. I knew that she loved writing, and reading, but when she when she was typing on her laptop and stuff, I go in there and say, "What are you doing, typing there?" and she'd say, "Oh mum, homework" and I go "Oh, that's good. Won't bother you." But she was writing in her journal, and also short stories and poems. That was a way of expressing herself. So there are many things that I'm still learning about Victoria. And in fact one of the things—look, if any of you are bereaved, one of the things that I've learnt is that, when someone dies, that doesn't stop your relationship with them. In fact, as the years go by, your relationship keeps evolving. I just leave you that thought there.

The second one about a message—well, there are some mums here, sadly, who are grieving the loss of their children ... , from a group called Mums United. And they are very supportive and blessed. It's sad in Singapore that the statistics for suicide are rising; 397 deaths last year, according to the Samaritans, and of those deaths, 94 were people aged 10 to 19, and in fact, suicide is the leading cause of death for Singaporeans aged 10 to 19. The leading cause of death. And Singapore goes to all this effort to get people to find partners, there's a baby shortage, you know, each child is so

precious, and yet, we have these children, they grow up and they take their own lives. So something is terribly wrong, not just with society in terms of giving young people a future, but you know, societies in general—my own country has the highest rate of teen suicide in the developed world. So, mums have got together, and we've not learnt a lot here, but the other mothers are Singaporean—one thing that strikes me is, A. how each of the kids was a very kind person, kind and sensitive, and gentle with animals. So it seemed life had been a little bit harder for these nice, sensitive kids. And the second thing is, when you lose your loved one, sometimes, you know, they very easily they could've been saved, if there was a bit of procedure in place in the schools or with counsellors or psychiatrists. And coming together, we've realised this common thread of—oh it's a strong word—negligence. And what happens is that the organisations and institutions just wanted us mums to go away. To shut up—grieving, probably mentally disturbed—go away, don't rock the boat. But we've realised that this has happened so often; there is something wrong, and it needs to be addressed. So, Vlad, when you ask for any call or message—I don't want to be presumptuous and speak on behalf of the mother's group, but we feel that this is a national emergency. And that we've got to save these kids, we've got to give them hope for the future; they're precious. We've got to—not just to encourage them, we've got to reach, and give them really clear places they can reach out. And also we've got to be more aware of what they're seeing on social media. One or two mothers have shared how their child googled 'how to kill yourself' and followed the techniques online. I don't have the answers at all. But I'm just showing you the problems we've got, the urgency of this issue, and that if any of you in any way feel you can help them, then please help, there are many ways to help. As I say, look at your inner voice, and what skills you have, but that's my message.

Akshita: Thank you, the lady over there?

Audience: Linda, thank you. Can you say something about how Victoria's writing made it to the New Yorker, how you got in touch with Dr Bering, got in touch with him to share the journals?

Linda: Ah, yeah. Yes. So that's an issue I also wrestled with. How much of her diaries do I share? So I ended up sharing them with a researcher, a psychologist called Dr Jesse Bering. So he was writing a book at the time, 'Suicidal, Why We Kill Ourselves'. And that has since been published in the UK and the US. And one chapter is dedicated to Victoria. And it analyses her diary writing, within new modern frameworks of psychology. So it points out her dysfunctional thinking. You may have read an extract in the Sunday Times where she's walking down the street and she sees one of the cool kids, who's just gym-fit, got the right gear, and the right attitude, and Victoria's just thinks, 'oh I could never be like her'. But I soon found out that that particular kid is very troubled herself. And Victoria always assumed the worst about her own situation. So that research has been useful—there's not a lot of actual diaries written like that. Particularly—a lot of teenagers write diaries, right? But the thing with Victoria's diary is that it was very confident. Unlike herself

in her life, her writing has got like a manifesto. ‘And this is how I see the world, this is where the world is going wrong’—like she was particularly vicious about capitalism; the system we work in. She did some office experience as an intern at 15 or 16 and that put her off office life forever. She was just appalled at it. And she would go on the MRT to school early, and she said people would just have their heads down looking at their phones, these grey men in suits—is this the life that lies ahead for me? So that writing I think has some messages that a lot of young people are feeling, and so, the researcher looked at that, and he was very respectful. And in fact he came and visited us in New Zealand and went to where her remains are in a small cemetery there in Malcolm’s hometown. So, his book’s been reviewed a lot—so there I was, trying to write my book, which sounds so churlish, and there’s the Guardian and the UK, kinda the revered newspaper for literary types, singling out my daughter’s writing, and praising it. And then in the New Yorker in January, which is like, well, you know, the New Yorker’s really highly regarded—so there was this reviewer, and he sent in the whole review on Victoria—and in fact I was going to read it out later, but I could read it out now. If I could just—because here’s a message for you guys, as well, I feel. So he said—his name, the reviewer’s called Bo Barrett. And he said, “In her diary, Vic was at work on a profoundly important story, one that was asking all the right questions. Her struggles across its pages reveal a consciousness that chafed against expectation and social pressures, and that was in desperate search of a more stable narrative. It’s impossible to know, of course, whether a better story would have saved her. The onus falls upon us to examine the ones we’re still telling.” And I think of narrative in Singapore—new narratives, the narrative we are telling ourselves. Thanks for your question.

Audience member: Suicide, you know, has always been regarded as a stigma. And what defines stigma is a mark of disgrace. I would like to know, as someone who is well-known in media, and you mentioned that this book is literally going out to the world, how did you get past that?

Linda: I don’t think I ever have and throwing the floor open to questions makes me flinch. Sometimes they say, don’t you blame yourself or ask difficult questions or what shame do you feel? Stigma is shame.

You know I always blame myself and I do feel a lot of shame, but I won’t let society make me feel ashamed. I gather that in Singapore, until fairly recently, there’s been a lot of shame about suicide. Mothers who’ve lost their kids this way, family who don’t want to talk about it or they cut them off. In fact, my own family cut me off. So, I lost not only my daughter, but my family. They can’t handle it, or they feel it’s a bad thing. Last year even with good friends in New Zealand, their daughters were pregnant, but they didn’t want me to meet them, because I might bring them some bad luck, you know. And I think sometimes it’s the case here too.

So, you're this thing that no one wants to be. Every parent dreads losing your child and there you are. You had that bad thing happen to you and you might bring that bad vibe or bad things along. So, people find it easier not to engage you, or even easier to dismiss you. They just think of something bad about you and pin it on you—their daughter died, because the mother worked too hard or was always at work or whatever. But I can't let that drag me down. I can't let that affect me. I mean everyone tries in their own ways to deal with it. There's certainly the pressure of shame.

But I don't feel ashamed because my daughter was a wonderful person and I was proud of her and proud of everything she lived, and I don't think she would want me to feel the shame.

Akshita: There was one more question. Are you ok to take it? (Linda: Yes.) Alright, somebody had raised their hands. Ok yes please.

Audience member: Loss Adjustment is all about loss and tragedy, now could there be a sequel about the person Linda who has been alive for 15 years and the joy of having her? Would you write it? I would love to read it. Thank you.

Linda: I'm still trying to deal with stuff. There is a book that I want to write, so one of the people who helped me get through this time was my mother in law, Malcolm's mom—Sheena—who was an extraordinary person who showed me what real love is. Sadly, she died last year in October. But I was lucky enough to go back and spend 3 months with her—Straits Times let me work remotely in New Zealand, and she was living in a small town in Oamaru and we had a like what we called a crim—the holiday home cottage nearby. So, it was my provision to visit Malcom's mom just about every day.

She was 92 and so I was 59—so quite a big age difference between us. And from her I learnt about her fierce love for the family and I also learned, I didn't know back then, about her poverty stricken background, of her very difficult youth and how she somehow climb her way out of that to be a nurse and to go on to have a very successful life.

Also, she was very close to Victoria, and they shared certain things. I don't know if you have this in your family, not just genetics looks, but mannerism. She and Victoria used to flex their hands the same way and they both love the same colour of flowers. So, whenever I walked into Sheena's place, I saw the lavender and white—these are lovely—purple flowers that both people love. I would like to explore that.

One thing that I have learnt is that, writing a non-fiction book has been extremely difficult. I have to get approval from the ethics committee of the university. I lost a month's writing time just travelling the country and skyping around the world, and getting people's permission, consent

forms, and having to give them information and pull out the social sciences-oriented ethics approval forms. This nearly killed me, because I'm not very good at forms, and also it was excruciating going to people who I have already spoken to and then having to get their consent. Though actually the nice people who were good about it, and I also discovered new things in the process.

So, the next book I want to write will be fiction, and it will probably be an intimate portrait of two women of very different ages in the last stages of one of their life. On the face of it, it doesn't actually sound interesting—where's the dramatic conflict? But there was a lot of conflict for me because I often resisted such messages of what she had to say and do the opposite. Both of us quite stubborn. Also, the teasing out of the reality of Sheena's life was quite poignant for me. And then we got the backdrop of—during that time, it was a minor thing, but I was becoming a kind of social activist back in New Zealand, and I tried to stop a harbour development and speak in a public meeting and do stuff like that, and so the mayor of the town was very difficult and turned against me. People on Facebook literally launched this campaign against me. They saw my Facebook site and there were messages like 'No wonder your daughter killed herself' and all this stuff.

And I was trying to stand up for the harbour because of the birds. They had some penguins there and they had this shacks and old wharfs where Scott looked for his Antarctic missions from and it was just beautiful. Then the town council went to turn it into a tourist development and put a zipline there and we stopped the zipline. So, that's also that I liked to explore next time.

But for now, I'm writing a book of poetry. So, we'll see how that goes. I don't know about poetry, sometimes I mention poetry to Singaporeans, their eyes gloss over. Is it because it's seen as something dilutant and flippant or is it seen as something that's sort of highbrow because I don't want it to be inaccessible. And there's some good ... performance stuff happening now.

But I'm kind of moved by the way the maintenance men in Singapore have cut off all the branches off the trees around where I live. I just feel the trees pain—do you know what I mean? They seem to be overzealous in cutting the branches. And hungry ghost months—some strange things keep happening to me during Hungry Ghost Month. So, I've explored that in my poetry. So, we'll see what happens.

Akshita: I think we probably have time for one more. Last question if anybody has one—looking to the gallery, and here's another one.

Audience member: Hi, I would I like to know how—I mean I cannot imagine having to go through the loss of a loved one, but I do have friends that go through that. So how will we best be there for them, or support them?

Linda: Yes, that's a very good question Thank you very much. What can you do? I think it's important to be there for them but also sometimes to ask the hard question—"Are you okay?" and they'll fob you out quite often, but "No, are you really ok?". And I would say the biggest danger of all, is when you've got a depressed friend, is when they start smiling because I hear time and time again that's when they made up their mind to go. They feel relieved. So, whether someone is obviously down at heart or smiling, try and look behind their face—look at the body language, what are they really saying with their bodies.

When I looked at Victoria's photos before she died, I never stood back and look at her as she was then. I thought 'My beautiful daughter'—but actually she was hunched over, she lost a ton of weight. She looked miserable in the photos, but I never stood and looked. I think also as friends, you might have to seek help externally. So, Victoria told her counsellor not to tell her parents anything. But someone needs help, sometimes they need intervention. Sometimes drugs and a spell in the psych ward is going to save them, because they are hell bent on killing themselves. It is very difficult for you as a friend but keep an eye out there and make sure to include them in things. Even if they're really rude to you or just not great fun to be around—include them. It's when they get excluded and isolated that it's particular worry. So those are just some practical things. I'm no expert. There are articles you can look up. That would be my advice.

Akshita: And she's provided a very nice list of resources at the back of the book. And I think those will kind of be around at all the events you're speaking at? (Linda: Yes.)

Kah Gay (Publisher): Actually, I think the gentleman is also thinking, how can people be there for you or people in your position.

Audience: Like friends, like helping friends who are grieving.

Linda: Ah, helping friends who are grieving—see brain didn't follow through so they will get things wrong. Poor Akshita, we make appointments and things, or she tells me really important information and I completely forget it.

Akshita: No no, that's because I'm very easy to overlook. (laughs)

Linda: So, it's not because we're not thinking about it, we can't... this stuff just gets... see how I'm stammering? Stuff just gets jammed up and won't function well.

Um, not overload us with stuff. Always feel free to give us food. Food's got so much love involved in it. Asking someone out to dinner or to take tea means a great deal. I think those little comments would be it.

Akshita: Thank you very much, thank you all for being here and for your really really thoughtful questions. Linda, was there anything else you wanted to say or to thank?

Linda: Oh yes yes, there is. Just shortly. Thanks. One of the things I learned over the years is gratitude and it's really help me keep going. I wasn't a very grateful person before. Even my neighbours taught me to write gratitude journal—I didn't think there was something I could suddenly be grateful for but there is. The little things that keep happening. I hate that we're positive, but it sorts of makes you feel purposeful.

So, let me enjoy giving thanks to all of you. Feel my immense gratitude that you came along that you honoured my daughter this way, you know I'll never be able to thank you enough and if you ever feel down or doubt yourself—know that you did this good thing this day.

I also like to thank some people here who knew my daughter or met her. So, there are two people here who are both teachers—Helen and Wanda. They knew my daughter Victoria and their daughters played with Victoria so that makes it real for me. There should be some Filipino domestic helpers, who came along today, and they taught my daughter joy. They would take her for picnics together in the park. She was always happy with them.

Neighbours and colleagues, thanks for being here. And people, readers, discovering Victoria and finding that her life in Singapore and her writing connects them for the good.

I would like to thank my husband Malcom, who has supported me during his own journey of grief. And I am pleased to see a lot of men here. Men—I know this is a generalization, but you tend to grieve in different ways to women. Sometimes, you are alien creatures to me in how you grieve. Malcom, I know you really throw yourself into your work and your work colleagues have been very supportive and they are like your family.

Also just quickly on men, with the suicide prevention, I think it can be more gender-based—ways of looking at prevention, because I think men in particular keep things bottled out, and you got this great burden on you to be providers of the family, to keep it all together. And that's just another thing on you and it can become a lot of big pressure. So, if there was a way for men here to know its ok to say I need some help, just sending a vibe out to anyone who might need help that way.

Akshita, thank you for being a compassionate presence and a writerly inspiration. I'm sorry that I haven't been able to read your book yet because it's fiction. I think I'll just see the performance. I'll get there one day; I really want to. (Akshita: Please don't, half of my family hasn't read it, go on.)

Yes, and of course, the biggest thank you must go to my publisher—Ethos Books and their team. I'll name them, there's redoubtable Mr Fong Hoe Fang—the publisher, the man who launched Ethos or Pagesetters as it was all those years ago, and his wife who's a terrific editor in her own right, Wai Han.

And Kah Gay, up there. He was the one who recognised the book for what it is straight away, and he got Victoria. His belief in the book has just been remarkable.

Kum Suning, my editor. The kind of editor, an editor could only dream of, as well as being a writer. You're the editor's editor and I will be always grateful for your sensitive suggestions. When I look back were was absolutely vital, but which I quibbled with you. Never mind when a reporter quibbles with you ever again.

Foo Peiyong, of the marketing team, who sat with me with some of my media interviews who I find difficult, and she's just this cheery positive person and very well organised.

Jennifer, the sales manager.

Finance master, Bee Choo.

Book lover, Benjamin.

And then Justin Chia. Is Justin here? He is a very young guy who saved my hands, he came up with the idea, because I find it hard to sign the books with my tendonitis, so he came up with the idea of doing my signature on stickers with the little bird motif, so that was really great. A different thing.

Um of course, even though she's not here, she's gone but she's still a presence, Victoria. I was really privileged to know you for those 17 years. So that's my messages, thank you.

Suning (Editor): And I think, on behalf of my team, I can't begin to say how precious and valuable working on this has been for each of us in the team. And also, I would like to give a thanks to all of bookstore partners really, and The Moon as well. I mean the association is astounding. And to

all of you, if you believe in what we do, then we would really appreciate if you would spread the word of the book and Victoria's story. Some housekeeping matters, if you would like to purchase the book, it's downstairs. And purchase a drink as well because they are a very nice partner to work with and we really thank them. And if I may close, we would like to have a little group photo with all of close friends and associates together here. This is the end of the launch, formally. Thank you once again.