

A simple morality tale resides at the heart of Clara Chow's "Cave Man", a cunningly told story, set in a hyper-modern future that is fast becoming true. What is common sense is seldom common and the narrative shows us by its unexpected ending, and through the buried longings of its characters, that what gives us ultimate meaning has absolutely nothing to do with our aspirations for creature comforts or being caught up in the shimmer and dazzle of technological advances.

—Cyril Wong, poet

Alfian Sa'at's "The Borrowed Boy" is an urgent examination of the socio-economic, domestic and personal tensions which arise upon the choice of a mother, Junaidah, to extend participation in her family's Hari Raya festivities to the titular orphan boy, Mydeen. With the heat of family obligations coming to a boil during the festive season and the intrusion of an outsider, anxieties to which Junaidah believes she has been accustomed swim to the surface and exert themselves in manifold permutations. We witness Junaidah clutching at socio-economic status through garb and mode of transport, bearing the brunt of an unequal distribution of parenting roles and responsibilities, suffering a sequence of little emotional betrayals that climaxes in family conflict, while nursing the self-indulgent propensity for wanting to be and do good. At the end of the story, as Mydeen successfully navigates through the thick maze of societal conventions to receive affection (whether out of love, circumstance or pity) from his newfound acquaintances, it is Junaidah who is left trapped as an outsider in these labyrinthine obligations. Alfian's story confronts marginalisation in its intimate and unassuming forms, when we are inescapably not who we aspire to be.

—Jerrod Yam, poet

In "Rich Man Country", a probing spotlight is shone onto a familiar yet oft ignored figure in our manicured Singaporean cityscape—the unremarkable migrant worker. In spare yet evocative prose, Liow deftly frames the inner life of an anonymous labourer, filling in the details of a grindingly difficult past and the shimmer of an imagined future, painting an affecting picture of desperation and yearning, hope and despair. The jolt of its ending—with its mix of mystery, inevitability and tragedy—lingers long after the story closes and asks the essential: can the concept of humanity exist in a world where so many lives are still deemed disposable?"

—Charmaine Chan, author of *The Magic Circle*

What are the limits of empathy? How large are our worlds? And whom, "at the end of the day", do we count as our own? These, and other soul-baring questions, sit at the heart of this deceptively simple schoolyard parable by Koh Choon Hwee: a supple, surprising story that rises to the task of answering them with remarkable finesse. "Margarine and the Syrian Refugee Project" is, on one level, a sensitive tale of difference, learning, and friendship. But it is also full of other difficult truths: about local inequality and global injustice, about distant pain and immediate privilege, and about a society that—like Koh's characters—is struggling to grow up. I hope that

everyone who reads this story will return to it again and again, as I did, to revel in Koh's vivid prose and finely-observed details. But even more so, I hope that everyone will read it and ponder. For here, as in all the best stories, is plenty with which to measure and know ourselves.

—Theophilus Kwek, co-editor of *Oxford Poetry*

This story says much more than it lets on. In a matter of a few pages, Philip Jeyaretnam deftly unveils the hidden ironies, buried nuances and quiet struggles of life in a city governed by economic pragmatism. As an insurance agent, the protagonist, Ah Leong, may be a perennial, familiar presence in the cityscape but Jeyaretnam renders him far from ordinary. Whether cautionary or as lamentation, the tale of Ah Leong's repression and compromises speak to the looming presence of an uncredited second protagonist, the city of Singapore itself. The image of an HDB block, invoked in "Painting The Eye", comes to mind here—literal and lifeless on the outside, but literary and layered once we can get past the padlocked metal grille.

—Nazry Bahrawi, translator and critic

From its very first line, Felix Cheong's "The Boy with the Missing Thumb" has the audacity and the surrealism of Kafka set in the family-familiar home-turf of Singapore's heartland, while also recalling the naughty children's stories of Enid Blyton. No doubt, readers will readily identify with Gregory's interior monologue and his need to conquer long-ago demons. As they are drawn more deeply into his predicament, they will likely take some comfort in the idea that all this is not real. Or is it?

—Noelle Q. de Jesus, author of *Blood: Collected Stories*

Latha presents Singapore's Tamil community in its full complexity, unafraid to criticise as well as to celebrate. Her incisive storytelling lays bare the ways in which Singapore mistreats and marginalises those not in the mainstream, whilst also depicting problematic behaviour within the community. In "Identity", a woman from India finds herself treated badly by both the country she has emigrated to, and the family she has married into. She is a wife, mother and Singaporean—but when these labels become meaningless to her, what is left? A compassionate, clear-eyed study of a person who, having sacrificed a great deal of herself, is left wondering whether the trade-off was worth it.

—Jeremy Tiang, writer and translator

Balli Kaur Jaswal's "Everest" is a moving meditation on childhood, family, and the search for a home away from home. In crystalline prose, Jaswal brings us into the sixteenth-storey HDB flat of an immigrant household, consisting of the precocious and clear-eyed Meena, her idealistic father, her pragmatic mother, and her endearingly sensitive brother with "learning problems." As the family struggles to adjust to life in a Singapore "so newly and neatly planned that it looked like a builder's model," they strain to appreciate the tiny acts of generosity that are all they can offer one another

during this fraught time. At turns poignant and funny, this story captures life's small, profound moments and makes them resonate well beyond their size.

—Kirstin Chen, author of *Bury What We Cannot Take*

"The Moral Support of Presence" by Karen Kwek is a wry sketch of a bereaved daughter, left to untangle gently crossed cultural threads after the passing of her mother, who was estranged from her more traditional Chinese husband and converted to Christianity late in life. The story is most successful in its strands of comedic social drama, as when a monk and a pastor compete for the spoils of death.

—Jolene Tan, author of *A Certain Exposure*

The one thing I have always admired about Yu-Mei Balasingamchow's prose is that you always feel like you are in steady, reliable hands. She never dwells too long in any moment; she doesn't indulge in excessive sentimentality; every note is held for an appropriate amount of time—all of these traits become evident in her excellent short story of a couple in transition, "What They're Doing Here". Their lives are difficult, yes, but their resilience and steadfastness in the face of change cast them in a heroic light. That an ex-stewardess should find her situation "up in the air", so to speak, is a stroke of poetic genius; where she lands is a problem that will haunt us all.

—Daryl Qilin Yam, author of *Kappa Quartet*

Jeremy Tiang's "Sophia's Party" is pitch-perfect in its rendition of the irony, sentimentality, and surprising love in two overlapping narratives. The first narrative is the overdetermined story that Singapore tells itself and its citizens on National Day. The second, much smaller, but on a similarly shrill note, is the "fairy tale of their marriage" that Sophia tells her guests. The love story between Sophia and Nicholas is as much about romance as it is about storytelling: "Here they are, and the story is as good an organising principle as any to make sense of their lives." Elliptically, "Sophia's Party" suggests it does not matter that your love story is somewhat untrue as long as the love it showcases is true.

—Christine Chia, author of *Separation: a history*

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Introduction

Philip Holden

To fasten everyday clothing, we often make use of buttons, zips, or even Velcro. With more formal clothes, however, such as a cheongsam, we often make use of another form of fastening, the hook and eye. The hook and eye are hidden from view, and are difficult for a single person to fasten, but through their interlocking action two parts of a garment become a seamless whole. The short stories in this collection work like this in two ways. First, they present surprising connections made between characters, often through the help of others. Second, as readers, we find that we fit our own experiences into the world of each story, making a complete experience unique to each of us.

The subtitle of our collection suggests there is a further element to these short stories, that of marginality. Writing his famous study of the nature of short fiction, *The Lonely Voice*, Irish author Frank O'Connor struggled to define the genre. Short stories were clearly shorter than novels, yet they were not simply novels in miniature. They had, O'Connor noted, a very different effect on readers. The novel featured a broad vision of a community and a society, and a large cast of characters

occupying a range of social positions; it pulled its readers into a complex narrative world and kept them there. The short story, in contrast, often focussed on people who were on the margins of society. “The novel,” O’Connor argued, “still adheres to the classical concept of civilised society, of man as an animal who lives in a community... but the short story remains by its very nature... romantic, individualistic, and intransigent.”

O’Connor’s statement is a useful starting point when we think about reading short stories written in or of Singapore. In countries in Asia, the short story has often been dominant at times of social and political change, when societies are struggling to attend to the voices of those who have been marginalised, and reimagining what communities might be. In China after the 1911 Revolution, a host of short story writers attempted to envision a new, more democratic society, writing in *bai hua wen*, modern vernacular Chinese that could be read by a widening audience. In Manila in the 1930s, an explosion of short story writing in English and Tagalog explored issues of tradition and modernity in a rapidly changing society. In Indonesia, the short story was a central medium in the development of a national language during the period of decolonisation. Short stories in Singapore have been written for over a century in a number of different languages. These stories cross boundaries: they can be printed in newspapers or magazines, or published online via the internet and social media, and they can then be gathered into collections like this one. They can also be translated with relative speed from one language to another.

Following O’Connor’s insights, the short stories collected in *Hook and Eye: Stories from the Margins* bring into focus characters who are marginal in today’s Singapore. In this

focus, they encourage empathy in readers, a recognition that our own experiences of being marginalised may be a way of beginning to understand the marginal situations of others. They do this through techniques of storytelling, and many of these techniques are found in all prose fiction.

There is one feature, however, that distinguishes most short stories, and this returns us to O'Connor's observations about the genre. Unlike a novel, which immerses us in a different world, sometimes for days on end, the short story can often be read in one sitting. The process of reading takes us into the world of the story, but then returns us to our own world. In the last few pages of the short story, a character frequently has what James Joyce called an epiphany, a moment of intense personal insight. We feel the emotional complexity and power of the insight, but its precise nature is often difficult to express. After the epiphany, we return to our own world, but remain slightly troubled by the world of the story. We are back in our everyday reality, but it is not quite the same, and we begin to question what we have previously taken for granted. The power of the short story, indeed, is that it allows us to take a personal response back into the world, and, within defined parameters, enables a variety of different insights from different readers. The story's meaning is thus bound up with ourselves, and causes us to reflect on our own lives and our relations to society.



The process of reflection on marginality is central to all the stories in *Hook and Eye*. In Balli Kaur Jaswal's "Everest", with which the collection starts, we see a number of different forms

of disconnection caused by marginality. The most obvious of these is Mahesh's learning disability, which causes him to be put under pressure at school, but there are also other elements of estrangement in the story. Mahesh's family live in Singapore, but they are in transit. His father initially sees Singapore as simply a stepping stone to a better life in Europe or North America, and it is only by degrees that they come to see themselves as Singaporean. The story is told to us not by Mahesh but by his sister Meena, who has her own struggles with asthma, and her own desire to belong to Singapore. The story is suffused with details that show this process of coming to feel at home. The family drink Milo and eat Gardenia bread with peanut butter in the morning, and chicken rice and Hokkien mee in the evening. The HDB estate in which they live seems coldly efficient, like "fine machinery", and even alienating. Mahesh's persistent use of the block for training also indicates that dreams can be realised for him. The object of his pursuits—to become the first Singaporean to climb Everest—seems unattainable. However, despite the odds, he does achieve something, outdoing his sister. Meena engages in sibling rivalry with her brother, mocking his dyslexia and lack of ability to read. Yet, at the end of the story he outpaces her on the stairs, leaving her behind in a climb to the roof that is also a climb to "the clouds".

Koh Choon Hwee's "Margarine and the Syrian Refugee Project" also encourages self-reflection. The plot follows a common short story pattern, in which the introduction of a new character upsets a pre-existing equilibrium. Although this equilibrium is restored at the end of the narrative, there is a sense that things will never be quite the same. The narrator of the story finds that a new student, Marjorie, has been transferred to her

school, and is asked to do project work with her. The topic of the project, the Syrian refugee crisis, introduces a new dynamic: the narrator is surprised that her Malay friend, Nabilah, is well-informed about events in the Middle East. As the narrative progresses, however, it becomes apparent that the story hinges on class differences caused by wealth. Wealth means that Marjorie can leave the school for a foreign boarding school, and also leave her newly-made friends behind, but it insulates her from the everyday experiences of life in Singapore, and ultimately stunts her personal growth. As her final confrontation with Nabilah shows, she can feel abstract empathy for the refugees, but has not developed the interpersonal empathy necessary for everyday living. For all her privilege, she is paradoxically a more marginal figure than her two companions.

Clara Chow's "Cave Man" differs from most of the stories in this collection in its use of speculative fiction, through its creation of an imaginary Singapore of the future in which most inhabitants live underground. What is most interesting about this setting is not so much that it is different from the Singapore we know, but that it is surprisingly, and at times disconcertingly, familiar. The use of "ceme-columbariums", with their stress on the recycling of bodies, as educational sites, seems a natural extension of educational visits to NEWater factories or the Pulau Semakau Landfill. Everyday rituals such as music tuition continue as before. Despite this familiarity, the artificiality of underground existence seems to weigh on Alfred, the protagonist. His apartment is invaded by mould, and his fellow inhabitants of an underground world seem pale and unhealthy. In this atmosphere, he looks forward to his move to one of the few apartments that now exist above the surface. Yet, while Alfred's excitement about his move

drives the plot forward, his reaction at the ending of “Cave Man” surprises himself. Alfred’s reflection that his move has been a mistake asks readers to again reflect on their own experiences, of the relative worth of the built environment and the human relationships that exist within, and at times, in spite of it. It may be worth thinking about what we mean by margins in a literal sense. A margin describes the blank space that constitutes the border of a printed page, a place where an author adds footnotes, and where editors write comments and corrections. We might say that Chow’s story is, to extend this metaphor, writing about the margins of our lives in contemporary Singapore. The alternative universe that “Cave Man” explores might be seen as a series of footnotes, comments, and corrections that makes us think more deeply about our own society and our place within it.

Jeremy Tiang’s “Sophia’s Party” makes a particular use of the marginal character. The story is one of a number that are linked together in the collection *It Never Rains on National Day* (2015), and a reader who has read the whole collection will be familiar with Sophia and her English husband, Nicholas. Nicholas’s presence as an outsider at the annual National Day party that Sophia hosts for her friends initially seems to be a way of channelling the affectionate ambivalence that many of the characters feel in watching the ceremonies. His marginal status as someone who can never quite belong, however, leads to conflict both with others, and within himself. As the National Day ceremonies conclude, the story focusses on personal relationships between individuals, and in particular, that between Sophia and Nicholas. Its epiphany is Nicholas’s own realisation about the nature of the stories that we tell ourselves about our own lives. They may at times be untrue, but we cannot live without them, and at times it

seems more comfortable to rehearse old, comfortable stories than to attempt to think of new tales we might tell ourselves.

Several of the stories also make use of humour. In “The Moral Support of Presence”, Karen Kwek portrays the different meanings of the death of a woman to the significant others in her life: her daughter, Mun; her former husband, and Alexa, the woman with whom he has now chosen to make his life; and her church congregation. Mun’s wry accounts of the competition between different religious communities to conduct rites for the deceased, and of Alexa’s superstitious panic at an incident during the wake, are very funny. They also conceal a more serious theme. Despite her ironic distance—enhanced by WhatsApp conversations with her friend, Simon, who has migrated overseas—Mun feels a sense of loss and insecurity. Indeed, the most important character in the story is the dead mother, whose character is lovingly reassembled through explorations of the HDB flat she has lived in, and memories of her choice of clothes. The arrival of a dazzlingly beautiful green moth during the wake may indicate a connection with the mother, but even this seems marked by uncertainty. The moth flies off into the approaching dawn: following it with her eyes, Mun thinks that she might have seen “a glimmer of emerald in the distance, beyond the glow of the streetlights,” but then acknowledges that she cannot be sure.

Philip Jeyaretnam’s “Painting the Eye” makes an intriguing and unusual use of plot. The story’s main protagonist is Ah Leong, a character whom Jeyaretnam first introduced in his short story collection *First Loves* (1987), and whose life story he has followed in his fiction since. After graduating from the National University of Singapore, Ah Leong settles down to a humdrum existence as an insurance salesman, but continues to find self-

expression through painting. The plot is driven by a development in Ah Leong's professional life, and the curious behaviour of Mr Wee, one of his clients. Mr Wee seems a bizarre figure, taking out an insurance policy in the apparently certain knowledge that he will die soon, yet acknowledging he cannot claim for suicide or for pre-existing medical conditions. Ah Leong never finds a full explanation for Mr Wee's behaviour; what is more important, we come to realise, is the way in which he transforms both Mr Wee's behaviour and his own reaction to it into art. Ah Leong's own attempt at empathy, he realises, makes him marginal, a "freak" in a Singapore that he loves, but in which people turn away from emotional connection. The success of Ah Leong's painting, inspired by his meeting with Mr Wee, and his reflection on it, hint at something more. Art, and by extension stories such as Jeyaretnam's, offer the potential to reach out, to recognise truths about one's own situation through the experiences of another person.

Leonora Liow's "Rich Man Country" explores a more acute and compelling form of exclusion: the experience of foreign construction workers in Singapore. The story gives a gripping account of the aftermath of a workplace accident, and the way in which a human being is treated as a disposable product: his employers and immediate supervisors show more concern for their company's reputation than for his life. "Rich Man Country" gains its power not simply from the description of the accident and its vicious aftermath, but also from the way in which it explores the nameless worker's past, his migration from India to Singapore, and his hopes, fears, and disappointments. In humanising its protagonist, the story asks us uncomfortable questions about the way in which we, collectively and individually, turn away from

the experiences of others who are distanced from us by social class, occupation, and language, and asks us to think about ways in which we might work to change such behaviour.

Latha's "Identity" represents another kind of marginality. It is a translated text, originally written in Tamil, one of Singapore's official languages but one that is inaccessible to the majority of Singaporeans. "Identity", as its title suggests, deals with the question of belonging. Its protagonist is a new Singaporean, a migrant from India, who does not, as her opening exchange with the taxi driver suggests, correspond to stereotypical notions of what Singaporeans might be. As the story continues, the full nature of her struggles emerges. She faces gender discrimination at home, cannot find a job that does justice to her qualifications, and also faces conflict with her children, who are growing up in a cultural environment very different from that of her own childhood. At the end of the story, she remembers the excitement of weddings in Tamil Nadu, and of being part of a large community of friends, in contrast to the isolation she feels in her new country. The story does not end here, however. Reaching into her purse, she notices her pink identity card, the symbol of the new identity she has acquired, with all its hopes and disappointments.

Felix Cheong's "The Boy with the Missing Thumb" returns us to school. Bullied because of his weight, Gregory has retreated into an online gaming universe that seems better to him than real life. It is a world in which he can develop martial arts skills, and take revenge on his tormentors. Gregory's missing thumb at the beginning of the story hints that the division between his everyday world and the world of the video game is not absolute. Like "Cave Man", Cheong's story evolves as a form of speculative fiction that ultimately departs from realist conventions. In doing

so, the short story hints at the perils of a totalising narrative, one that consumes its marginalised protagonist and offers no possibility of escape. Its conclusion perhaps suggests that a retreat into the self, accepting only one single narrative logic may be—literally, in this case—fatal. As O'Connor hints, the art of the short story is not that it provides us with a story that is better than our own, but that its marginality causes us to ask questions of ourselves, to begin to question stories we have taken for granted, and to think of richer and more complex narratives of our own lives and our relations to individuals and communities.

Yu-Mei Balasingamchow's "What They're Doing Here" arises from a very specific social experience. In Singapore and throughout the world, globalisation has taken away the secure lifestyles that previous generations of workers have enjoyed. The two main characters in the story, Zul and Atiqah, have previously held salaried jobs. Zul has been retrenched as a factory engineer, while Atiqah has given up her job as a flight attendant with Singapore Airlines (SIA) in order to be able to participate more fully in family life. Their taking over of Zul's parents' nasi padang stall appears to offer them greater freedom to be their own bosses, but it also exposes them to a precarious labour and property market, where a sudden increase in rent can destroy carefully worked-out financial plans. The story illustrates Zul's and Atiqah's marginality, but also their resourcefulness in confronting the challenges they, and many Singaporeans, face. Atiqah is the central consciousness of the story, and her memories of her time at SIA intersect ambivalently with the present. Do such memories represent a resource to be drawn upon, or a powerful symbol of ongoing inequality?

The collection concludes with Alfian Sa'at's "The Borrowed

Boy". As he frequently does, Alfian plays with and subverts a reader's expectations. We initially think that the marginal figure is the character mentioned in the story's title, Mydeen, the boy whom Junaidah's family members take out of his orphanage for a day as an act of charity during Hari Raya. Yet Alfian, as many skilful storytellers do, asks deeper and unexpected questions of us as readers. Mydeen remains something of a cipher throughout the story: he behaves impeccably, but we never have access to his thoughts and feelings. In contrast, Junaidah is the central consciousness of the story, and, through her thoughts, we come to realise the tensions in her life: her need to display social status, the lack of communication in her marriage, and changes in her relationship with her son as he grows older and becomes more independent. For Junaidah, Mydeen opens up an "unanswerable longing", distancing her from her own life, and making her aware of how she cannot quite ever live up to the social expectations that are placed on her. The final scene of the story is both affecting and ambiguous: she wishes to ask Mydeen's forgiveness, and yet is unsure precisely what she should seek forgiveness for.



Collectively, the stories in *Hook and Eye* represent Singapore to us, as readers, showing us both what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. If, as we have suggested, story and reader are like the hook and eye on a piece of clothing, then it is the process of reading and enjoying such narratives that brings these two parts together. Each author's approach is different, but each story in its unique way fosters an "attitude of mind" that O'Connor felt was central to the definition of the short story, an ability to connect

characters together and centres to margins, thus realising for each of us the marginality inherent in our own experiences and senses of self.

A Note to Students of Literature

We may not realise it, but our whole world is made up of stories. Much literature also involves storytelling. Some of us grow up reading avidly from a very early age. When I was a child, both my parents were teachers, and they always had books in the house, and even in our car—a tiny Mini which had large open pockets on either end of the back seat, filled up with picture books. However, many of my friends were more interested in other kinds of stories: movies, comics, or popular music, where each song often also tells a story. In recent years, online and console games, and indeed apps on handphones, have meant that we can enter into stories as never before. We can become characters in an adventure, overcoming more and more difficult tasks, defeating opponents, or catching monsters, moving upward from level to level.

At the same time, older ways of telling stories persist. When families or groups of friends get together, especially after long absences, they interact by telling one another stories of what has happened to them. Some people seem particularly skilful and engaging storytellers, while others quickly lose our interest! Storytelling also exists in a wider world. The courts, for instance, are places where competing stories are told by the prosecution and the defence, with a judge having to decide which of them is true. Psychologists have suggested that our identities are stories that we tell ourselves, and which we continually update. These hidden stories look both back and forward, especially when we

are going through difficult times. We tell ourselves where we come from, and also dream of where we will be going in future.

Although we don't realise it, then, we are all already very experienced in listening to, reading, and indeed telling stories.

However, for many of us, studying literature like the stories in this collection can seem intimidating. In school, we are used to certainties, and passing exams and doing well often involves learning the correct answers to questions. When we come to study literature, then, we often adopt the same approach. We want the "right" answer, the key that will unlock the meaning of the story. At times we become so anxious that we do not allow the story to work its magic on us. We forget that the most important resource that each of us has is our emotional response to the story, something that is unique, and arises from our own experiences.

When you first read each story in the collection, do so simply for enjoyment, without worrying too much about analysis. After you've read the story for the first time, note down your feelings in response to it. Was there anything that you found particularly moving? Any character you identified with? Something that puzzled you? If you didn't find the story very engaging, what did you find difficult to relate to? Thinking through these questions after reading will allow you to begin formulating your response to the story. You'll find that among your classmates there will be some who broadly agree with you, but also others who find very different things in the story.

After we have read the story for enjoyment and become aware of our response, it is time to think more about how each story works. We often call novels and short stories "prose fiction", and most of us think of fiction as being the opposite of the truth. But

the root of “fiction” in the Latin language is actually the same as the word “finger”—it has to do with dexterity, a process of manipulation. Authors manipulate their plots, focussing on key scenes and skipping over others, and often setting up a conflict or problem whose solution the characters attempt to solve. These characters are themselves significant: they may be fully realised, or flat and caricature-like, depending on their overall function within the story.

Particularly important in short stories are narration and point of view. Who tells us the story, whose thoughts and perceptions do we get access to? Less obtrusive, but equally important, is the setting of the stories, which provides a background that is specific to the action of the story, but which also often has a symbolic function. Authors also use a variety of techniques that we might group under the heading “style”, including different registers of language, and literary techniques such as allusion, metaphor, and allegory. We might think of all these different techniques as a series of coloured filters placed over the story itself. Each of them focusses our perception of the world of the story, while still leaving open the possibility of personal interpretation. Studying literature is about trying to become aware of how these filters work, how they then make us think about the themes the stories address, and their relationship to a wider world.

To help you in this process, you’ll notice that this anthology contains **three further segments** after the stories themselves. First, there are **questions** on each story, divided into two sections. The first section takes you away from the story, and asks you to think in general about conflicts, issues, or situations in your own life and in Singapore society that relate to each story’s themes. You might think of them as exploring the *what*

of the story—what the story is about. The second section of questions is about the way the stories work as literary texts, and these questions ask you to begin to analyse how the stories affect you and other readers: they focus on the *how* of the story. The **glossary** gives you quick explanations of words with which you may be unfamiliar. Finally, the **biographies** tell you a little more about the authors, and provide you with a starting point if you would like to read more of their work.

Everest

Balli Kaur Jaswal

That was the year my brother decided to become a mountain climber.

He announced it at dinner one night. “It’s my resolution for 1993,” he declared proudly and then he described his training programme: he would climb all twenty-five storeys of our HDB block each morning before school and each evening before going to bed. This was the start. Once he was able to endure the climb without feeling short of breath, he would find a more challenging structure to scale.

“You won’t find a mountain in this country,” my father said. “The closest thing is that hill in Bukit Timah.”

“Let him,” my mother said quietly, except both Mahesh and I could hear her. “It’s important to have goals.”

My father ate the rest of his dinner in silence. This was normal in our house—our flat, I should say, because whenever I referred to it as a house, my father would ask, “Where’s the roof? The yard?” Roofs and yards were features of storybook homes; they were the stuff of my father’s dreams. He had been successful in moving us from India to Singapore but his sights were set