

# How We Live Now

*How We Live Now*

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# How We Live Now

stories  
of daily living



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edited by yu-mei balasingamchow

# Contents

<b>Editor's Introduction</b>	7
<i>Yu-Mei Balasingamchow</i>	
STORIES	
<b>Painting the Tiger</b>	15
<i>Philip Jeyaretnam</i>	
<b>Close to Home</b>	23
<i>Jinny Koh</i>	
<b>Fireworks</b>	41
<i>Dave Chua</i>	
<b>LIVE! At the Wet Market</b>	61
<i>Anittha Thanabalan</i>	
<b>Letters</b>	83
<i>Jessica Tan</i>	
<b>The Thing</b>	97
<i>Yeoh Jo-Ann</i>	
<b>Child's Play</b>	107
<i>Patrick Sagaram</i>	
<b>The Missing Clock</b>	125
<i>Yolanda Yu Miaomiao</i> <i>translated from the Chinese by Jeremy Tiang</i>	
<b>Before the Valley</b>	137
<i>Rachel Heng</i>	

<b>Night Fishing</b>	<b>159</b>
<i>Karen Kwek</i>	
<b>About the Editor</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>About the Authors and Translator</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>Discussion Questions</b>	<b>183</b>

## **Editor's Introduction**

*Yu-Mei Balasingamchow*

THIS ANTHOLOGY of short stories was brought together during the global Covid-19 pandemic. The historical context is worth foregrounding. It was—and still is, at the time of writing—a moment when every person and society faced the same physical vulnerability to a new, life-threatening coronavirus. Yet nations around the world responded in starkly different ways to protect their people and keep themselves going. As we watched our communities and others adopt a wide and sometimes contradictory range of practices, standards and expectations for everything from mask-wearing to international travel, it became clear that each society was determining its own way to live with the virus. Scientific facts mattered, but so did the prevailing local culture—the often unspoken principles and priorities that invisibly define how people live from day to day.

The exigencies of the pandemic might have illuminated these norms, but the stories in this collection—all written by Singaporeans in the last twenty years—demonstrate that these ways of being, thinking and doing have been with us in our city-island-nation-state for much longer. Although each story was of course written independently and is meant to be read and appreciated on its own, juxtaposing these works by various authors across time and subject matter can yield

fresh insights and resonances about the challenges, pressures and possibilities facing Singapore today. While each protagonist contends with their own set of compact, fraught circumstances, reading an individual narrative alongside new bedfellows can enrich and invigorate one's appreciation of the challenges, pressures and possibilities facing society.

The stories pose questions such as *what are we doing here, how did we get here, and what will we do now?*—inquiries that are still relevant in a world living with or in the aftermath of the pandemic. Ten-year-olds and teenagers struggle with adult-sized problems such as grief, loss and misplaced loyalties. The adults, meanwhile, do the best they can in the face of unexpected challenges. The personal conflicts and social tensions depicted in these stories usually stem from fear, misunderstanding, discomfort and unease. There is a recurring fear of the unknown, of the future or of the Other. There is also often a reluctance to look squarely at the fear or uncertainty, to open one's mind and recognise the nuances of the situation.

This collection offers young people an opportunity to reconsider the world they are entering, with urgent global challenges such as social inequality and climate change, as well as age-old frictions in family relationships and friendships. We see how each protagonist makes a choice about how they will live with their families, neighbours and foes. Some of these choices are moral, some are sympathetic or surprising. The stories invite us to ponder: if this is indeed how we live now, should we continue in this vein?

*How We Live Now* begins with Philip Jeyaretnam's "Painting the Tiger", which surfaces questions about art,

## *Introduction*

imagination, environmental history and social responsibility that will reappear in different forms throughout the collection. At the end of the story, the protagonist Ah Leong is discouraged by his existential crisis, yet recognises the beauty and promise—fleeting though it is—represented by his young son.

This leads into Jinny Koh’s “Close to Home” and Dave Chua’s “Fireworks”. Though very different in style, they present us with young people who choose how to live from observing the adults around them. “Close to Home” focuses on the domestic warmth and security of Auntie Loh’s household, while “Fireworks” explores how a teenage girl contends with the men who impose themselves on her life.

The ups and downs of friendship lie at the heart of the next two stories. Anittha Thanabalan’s “LIVE! At the Wet Market” plunges us into a spirited drama among mobile phone-wielding adolescent girls, assessing what their fealty is worth in an age of livestreamed social media. Jessica Tan’s “Letters” offers a throwback to a slower, quieter world before the internet, when hopeful intimacies emerged during the limbo of waiting for snail mail to cross the oceans.

Shifting the lens to the choices that adults make, Yeoh Jo-Ann’s “The Thing”, Patrick Sagaram’s “Child’s Play” and Yolanda Yu Miaomiao’s “The Missing Clock” (translated from the Chinese by Jeremy Tiang) offer gentle, moving portrayals of families grappling with absence and loss. The first two stories attend to some of the social, cultural and class pressures in Singapore, and the difficulty of carrying on in the face of formidable social or emotional strain. Taking a different tack, “The Missing Clock” reveals the tensions that



simmer beneath the seemingly straightforward relationships in a nuclear family.

Next, Rachel Heng's "Before the Valley" illuminates a different kind of 'family' and a space not often seen in literature: a home for older adults who are unable or, importantly, not allowed to live on their own. With its sparkling, unforgettable cast of characters, the story is radical in portraying older persons with agency, resourcefulness, humour and spunk. They are as lively—and painfully flawed—as their younger counterparts in other stories.

Finally, Karen Kwek's "Night Fishing" draws the collection to a close with another story about a father-son relationship, set against the backdrop of a rapidly modernising Singapore where shorelines and social expectations are in flux. "Night Fishing" offers a serendipitous echo of "Painting the Tiger"; Kwek's characters seem to be living in the "greyer" days that Ah Leong dreaded, and now it is the grown-up son who must help his father safely navigate the murky waters of a world transformed beyond recognition.

*How We Live Now* offers but a modest starting point for thinking about Singapore's contemporary situation. Although each of these stories unflinchingly addresses the full weight of its chosen subject matter, certain social issues that are relevant for young people or that have intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic do not appear within these pages. This is not at my discretion. I encourage attentive readers, after they have enjoyed these stories, to reflect on any gaps they might perceive. I invite curious minds to continue exploring these ideas through fiction—a list of short stories for recommended further reading is available on the

## Introduction

publisher's website and my personal website. As a project, beyond this print publication, *How We Live Now* aims to do what stories and literature have always urged us to do: to prompt questions and to generate discussion and debate, to resist the forces that would stop us from thinking, dreaming and reimagining.

Furthermore, in acknowledging that language is subject to change, every lexicon to incorporating new words, and the very definition of what constitutes Singapore to a steady influx of fresh possibilities, this collection uses italics only for emphasis, not for marking words that are 'foreign'. In our multilingual milieu, words and ideas mingle and are re-formed in everyday exchanges. Rather than to pointedly Other or exoticise a word to uphold an arbitrary notion of 'standard' English, this anthology chooses to honour each writer's voice and let them use the words they want to, sans typesetting peculiarities unless the writer wishes it.

Ultimately, *How We Live Now* aspires to make itself redundant by having the reader ponder the question, how should we live *next*? Young people today are inheriting a multitude of looming global concerns: the climate crisis, social inequity, economic uncertainty, among others, not least of which will be the lingering, long-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic. While this collection cannot possibly suggest what to do to fix these problems, it seeks to provide a space in which readers can contemplate different choices and futures. How we live now is never a *fait accompli*. How we live next—what *you* do next, after reading these stories—is the only thing that matters.

## Painting the Tiger

*Philip Jeyaretnam*

AH LEONG had taken his son to the zoo. The boy had devoured an orange Frutti ice cream, a grubby handful of chocolates and a packet of biscuits. He munched while the macaques chattered, swallowed as the sun bears yawned and dragged his feet as the orang utans slumbered. He was no more interested in his surroundings than when one or the other of his grandmothers placed him in front of the television with a packet of cream crackers. *Power Rangers*, *Pokemon*, *Digimon*, *Sakura*—marathon sessions of animated combat that left him in a belly-up, eyes-glazed stupor by the time Ah Leong got home from his insurance calls. Ah Leong was beginning to wonder if he shouldn't just have stayed home that day and flipped channels after all.

Then they met the polar bear. No snow. No ice. But still, a real polar bear. It caught a fish. It swam on its back. It ambled across the rocks and dived into the blue water. In front of the glass panel, the boy's eyes widened. He pressed his nose against the pane. The bear swam up and, almost vertical, belly to the boy, touched his own nose to the glass. David (for that was the little boy's name, chosen by his mother and father after watching a very informative programme about Michelangelo on ArtsCentral) squealed, alarm turning quickly to delight.

Now the boy was hooked. He ran ahead of Ah Leong