

TELLTALE: 11 STORIES

A Study Companion

• Dr Dennis Yeo •

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INTRODUCTION

AUTHOR'S NOTE

At the launch of *Telltale: Eleven Stories* on 30 July 2010, it was announced that the collection of short stories would be on the list of prescribed texts for O-Level 2012. We hope this study companion will influence your school's decision to offer the text.

However, this book is not a conventional teachers' guide or a students' workbook. It is not meant to be a Cliff's Notes to *Telltale*. It does not even adhere to the order of the short stories in the anthology. We would prefer to see it as a companion for anyone who is keen to study *Telltale*. The stories are arranged according to author, theme and a perceived level of difficulty. This book boldly intends to cater to both independent study and classroom use. Instead of providing answers, it will attempt to nudge the reader to explore different aspects of the short stories. As the stories have different strengths, this study companion will not place equal emphasis on the various literary aspects of the stories, but will focus on features of the individual story that are significant and striking.

This book does not claim to provide an exhaustive study of the stories but hopes to share certain insights that may lend themselves to a closer reading of the texts. The language used is simple to cater to an audience of young adults and the ideas shared serve only as a springboard for more research and analysis. Most of all, this book aims to encourage readers, whether casual or academic, to take a deeper look at what Singapore Literature has to offer.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Every story is accompanied by pre-reading, reading and post-reading activities. Before reading the short story, it is useful to familiarise yourselves with the context or background of the story and ask what you already know of what you will experience in the text. Although reading is leisurely, studying a text requires greater attention to detail, style and literary technique. As you use this companion, it is useful to have a pencil ready to immediately scribble down your thoughts and ideas. The pointers provided will help you keep track of what you have read.

Leading questions are used to help you consolidate some of the ideas arising from the stories. The questions are deliberately general so that they allow for a variety of responses. Do not feel that there is a need to give a right answer. Choose a segment, read the first question, give it some thought, scribble down your response before moving to the next question. Resist the temptation to merely think of the answer. Writing the answer organises and crystallises your thinking. Most importantly, think of it not as a task but as a trail of clues that will hopefully bring you to a discovery and understanding of the story.

Some of the pre-reading exercises refer to online resources, such as YouTube videos, Wikipedia articles and other websites. Do bookmark these websites, especially the Resource page, for quick and easy access to the links.

Homepage: www.wix.com/telltale11stories/ethosbooks

Resource page: www.wix.com/telltale11stories/ethosbooks#!study-companion

Facebook page: www.facebook.com/telltale11stories

OVERVIEW 1: Why study Singapore Literature?

Write down the names of three of your favourite musicians / singers / bands.

.....

Write down the titles of three of your favourite books.

.....

Does your list include a Singaporean artiste or a Singaporean title? (Yes / No)

Do you listen to local music or read local writers? If you do not, why not? If you do, why were they not on your list of favourites?

.....

.....

Do you feel that Singaporean 'products' are inferior in some way to those made by other countries?

.....

Do you feel the same way about Singapore Literature — that it lacks the depth or quality of Literature texts from other countries?

.....

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In *Literature in the Singapore classroom: Challenges for the future*, Kirpal Singh comments that "no one, it seems, appears eager or keen to claim our own writers ... How do we instill a sense of love for our own literature in our young? Indeed, how do we instill a respect and a regard for our own literature in ourselves?". What do you think about his observation?

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If we do not read our own Singapore writers, why should others? And will these authors and poets continue writing if no one reads them? What is your opinion of Singapore Literature?

.....

.....

OVERVIEW 2: What is Singapore Literature?

What do you think?

Must Singapore Literature be written by a Singaporean? (Yes/No)

Must Singapore Literature be set in Singapore?
i.e. must the events of the story happen in Singapore? (Yes/No)

Must Singapore Literature be about Singapore? (Yes/No)

If a Singaporean writes a story set in another country, is it still Singapore Literature? (Yes/No)

If a foreigner writes a story about Singapore, is it still Singapore Literature? (Yes/No)

Look at this poem by Gwee Li Sui, the editor of *Telltale: Eleven Stories*.
(This poem was first published in *Who wants to buy a book of poems?* by Gwee Li Sui, Landmark Books, 1998. Reprinted with permission.)

MY MOTHER LOVES ME by Gwee Li Sui

Mother, Mother
The kids in school
Call me kiasu,
But all I am
I got from u.

You bought for me
Big uniforms
A size too soon
And until then
I look cartoon.

Primary Two,
You bought textbooks
For standard Three.
I'll get A then;
Now I get Dee.

Then you got me
Tuition for Maths,
Language and Science,
Music and Sports,
And Omniscience.

Recess, you packed
Gain-weight tablets,
Vitamin pills.
They call me Hos-
Pital Nostrills.

Mother, Mother
The kids in school
Call me kiasu,
But that's not me –
I guess it's you.

§

Do you like the poem? Why or why not?

.....
.....

What makes the poem "Singaporean"?

.....
.....

What is your definition of Singapore Literature?

.....
.....
.....

Most of these allusions refer to cinema and the comparisons are usually made by Chee Beng and Kenny. How do these allusions contribute to the characterisation and theme?

.....

.....

How do 'Titanic' and 'Love Story' foreshadow or comment on Margaret's love story?

.....

.....

Mel Gibson, Ralph Fiennes, Antonio Banderas, Tom Hanks, Scarlett Johansson, Keira Knightley, Natalie Portman – if you could add to the list, who would you put? Why do you think these celebrities are mentioned?

.....

.....

What is the purpose of using such allusions in this short story?

.....

.....

GROUP DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Let's look at the opening sentence: *"Public transportation, being relatively cheap and widely available in Singapore, is an integral and unenviable aspect of school life on the island"* (p 207). Why does the story begin on this seemingly unrelated topic? How can the imagery of journeying, transportation and reaching a destination be related to (a) travelling through different stages of life (b) our compulsion to go overseas and (c) fulfilling one's dream and finding one's future?
- Consider the depiction of men and women in the stories you have studied so far. How are the roles of men and women changing and how does this affect the way the sexes relate to each other? *"What's a guy to do?"* (p 219) suggests that it is the male gender that is being victimised by the women. Do you agree?
- In many of the stories you have read, the protagonist is often entrapped literally or metaphorically and seeks freedom. Do the characters achieve that liberation and at what cost?
- *"Singapore sucks"* (p 210). Do you agree with Chee Beng? If not, why then do some Singaporeans want to live or study overseas? Or do you agree with Kenny that *"Being Singaporean is something larger than simply living in Singapore"* (p 208)? Do you think Singaporeans feel a sense of belonging to Singapore?

The Man Who was Afraid of ATMs by Wena Poon

BEFORE YOU READ THE STORY

Interview an adult (preferably someone who is at least 50 years old) on these aspects of life.

1. What is a "cassette player" and what did it look like? How has the way we listen to music changed?

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2. What is a "floppy disk"? What is a "Pentium 486" or "WordPerfect"? And what was life like before the Internet became mainstream?

.....

3. What is a "trunk call"? How has telephone services changed over the years and how has this affected our lifestyle?

.....

With the same person in mind, create a step-by-step instruction manual on how you do any ONE of these: (a) download and play music files (b) use MSN (c) send an SMS. Write it down in 10 steps or less. Try to pre-empt some of the difficulties the person might have in learning this new skill.

TASK:

Step One:

.....

Step Two:

.....

Step Three:

.....

Step Four:

.....

Step Five:

.....

Step Six:

.....

Step Seven:

.....

Step Eight:

.....

Step Nine:

.....

Step Ten:

.....

Now let the person try to complete the task. Try not to intervene.

What difficulties did your interviewee face? Did he find your instructions clear?

.....

.....

Did you consider including some tips or 'troubleshooting' solutions?

.....

.....

How did your interviewee feel about executing the task? What was he most afraid of?

.....

.....

AS YOU READ THE STORY

Would you like to live in a different country? Which country would it be and why?

.....

.....

In what ways is life in Canada enviable from the viewpoint of those living in Singapore?

.....

.....

"Chang disapproved" (p 87) – name three aspects of Canadian life that Chang disapproved of.

1.

2.

3.

Why do you think Chang is unable to get used to life in Canada?

.....

.....

AFTER YOU READ THE STORY

Think of and troubleshoot three things that could possibly go wrong when you are using an ATM. The first one has been suggested for you.

What happens	Why it happened	What to do
You put the ATM card in and it comes out again.	The card is inserted wrongly.	

QUICK SUMMARY

What are the main characters like? How would you describe them?

Chang:

Sylvie:

Leng:

Annette:

What is the plot of this story?

What do you think this story is about?

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

LITERARY FOCUS: Conflict

One of the easiest ways to analyse a text is to identify conflicts in the text. In most cases, the denouement of the plot resolves the conflict — the hero defeats the villain, the lovers are reunited and they all live happily ever after. Because the short story merely presents a slice of life, it has greater liberty to leave the ending open and ambiguous.

The easiest conflict to identify in the story is that between the protagonist and other characters. Characters often personify abstract ideas or represent opposing positions on an issue, and this results in tension in the story. The conflict between characters thus can be expressed as a relationship of binary opposites, for example, Good versus Evil, Reason versus Passion or Traditional versus Liberal. In this short story, for instance, the main conflict is between Sylvie and Chang. How would you describe the contrast between these two characters?

Sylvie	Chang

It is important to note that Sylvie and Chang do not hate each other. They represent different generations but they are similar in some ways. What do Sylvie and Chang share in common? Do you feel that a 'generation gap' is inevitable?

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The second type of conflict is the one that the protagonist battles with external forces, which are usually natural or social. Most of the time, this conflict is between the individual's wishes and desires and society's demands and expectations.

Geographical

Firstly, Chang is struggling with his unfamiliar environment as he is *"in a strange country"* (p 93). This is the only story in 'Telltale' that is not set in Singapore. He restricts himself to the *"same route ... few variations"* (p 96) and he only knows his way around Chinatown as *"he felt happy in Chinatown"* (p 96). What other examples show Chang struggling with his new surroundings?

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Linguistic

The story describes *"two large tribes of Chinese people in Singapore — those who received their education in English, and those who went to traditional Chinese schools"* (p 89). Chang is a Chinese-language teacher who is disconnected from his son and his granddaughter in terms of language. To Chang, *"Our English is not good enough for the English, and our Chinese is not good enough for the Chinese"*(p 97). Even with the Cantonese people in Chinatown, he remains apart as *"he wriggled uncomfortably in his linguistic apparel"* (p 98). What other examples are there of the language barrier that Chang has to overcome in Canada?

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Ethnic-cultural

Chang is further alienated by his distinct cultural background, not just from the Canadians but also from his family. Have you ever travelled to a foreign land and felt *"like their guest navigating among their strange ways"* (p 99) because of the different language or customs there? Where did you go and how did it make you feel?

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Chang feels that there is racial prejudice in Canada as they did not bother “*what type of Chinese you were. You tumbled headlong into the same racial trench as the other immigrants with yellow skin*” (p 101). His encounter with the traffic cop reveals that Chang feels victimised and thinks that he “*wasn’t on his home turf anymore, and who knows, maybe they just like to pick on Chinese people here*” (p 95). A close look at the ATM incident may be quite telling.

“Unfortunately, a man and a woman joined the line. They were both white. He kept turning around to look at them, feeling ill.” (p 99) ... “But over here it was all different. This was a foreign ATM machine. And the white people standing behind him were sighing and looking impatient.” (p 100) ... “He heard the man behind sighing impatiently. From the corner of his eye, Chang saw the man turn and say to the woman behind him, “God, don’t you love these people?” (p 100) ... “He did not see the man’s face, he did not see the expressions of the other people who had joined the line.” (p 101)

Do you feel that Chang was discriminated against or that Chang was being paranoid or both?

Note how he describes the man and woman as “white”. He then admits that he himself has been guilty of referring to those from other ethnic groups as “*these people*” (p 101). He resents being mistakenly grouped with “*a textile worker, a dim sum waiter, an illegal immigrant*” and feels that “*It was horribly unfair. Don’t they know he wasn’t that kind of a person?*” (p 101). “*It was different being in a foreign place. He felt more comfortable being surrounded by Chinese faces, buying from Chinese stores*” (p 97). In your opinion, how much of the ostracism that Chang feels is self-imposed?

The third type of conflict is self-conflict. Most characters are struggling within themselves and with their own identity. For instance, we often talk to ourselves especially when we are in a dilemma and need to make a choice. Sometimes, we debate with ourselves about what we should do. Chang claims that “*in Singapore, you knew who you were, and people knew who you were*” (p 101). What has resulted in Chang “*feeling very small and lost*” (p 102) since going to Canada?

This sense of self-conflict is not just found in the protagonist Chang. He represents a microcosm of the conflict within our society. On a larger scale, this conflict is seen in the divisions among the Chinese community in Chinatown. The linguistic gap between Mandarin and Cantonese speakers and the differences in their country of origin, “*either from Hong Kong or Taiwan*” (p 98) reveal that the Chinese are diverse and divided. After all, “*Chinese people rip each other off too*” (p 97). Extending this to a more macro level, this can also be seen in the attitudes of Singaporeans towards their country. For example, Annette asks, “*Who wants to live next door to a Singaporean anyway?*” (p 98). How do we as Singaporeans feel conflicted in terms of our attitude towards our language, ethnicity and country?

How important is the role that language and country play in creating a sense of identity, rootedness and belonging?

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ‘WEST’

- a. Did you grow up watching Disney and Pixar movies more than you did cartoons of your ethnic group? (Yes/No)
- b. Did you grow up speaking English more than you did in your own ethnic language? (Yes/No)
- c. Did you grow up reading Harry Potter instead of books from your ethnic culture? (Yes/No)
- d. Did you grow up wishing that it would snow during Christmas? (Yes/No)
- e. Did you grow up feeling that your ethnic group was “*backward*” (p 90)? (Yes/No)

“But I want stories written about people *like me*.”

“But you’re not like the children in the English books you read,” said Chang. “You’re a Chinese girl.”

Sylvie looked confused. (p 90)

Do you feel that you have lost some of your self-identity as most Singaporeans are said to “*merge into the misty havens of the West*” (p 88)?

Chang senses Sylvie’s contempt for her Chinese heritage as “*being Chinese was backward*” (p 90). She has little understanding of her background and finds his books “*funny-looking*” (p 89). Instead, she takes pleasure and pride at feeling “*like something out of a Harry Potter book*” (p 88). What are our impressions of the West in contrast to the East? Why are we inclined to embrace Western culture instead of our own? Do we suffer an inferiority complex concerning the way Caucasians look at us?

The sense of Chinese culture Annette subscribes to is an empty shell of a romanticised Eastern exoticism as represented by her “*high-collared cheongsam in the old style*” (p 102). Leng has already been influenced by notions of Western culture. He converts to Christianity, as he thinks an ideal wedding is one “*held in a beautiful church*” (p 89). Chang, on the other hand, distinguishes between “*Chinese martial arts epics which he loved and memorised by heart, long before they became popularised and adapted by Hong Kong television dramas*” (p 89). Describe a tradition or ritual of your ethnic culture that has become more commercialised. Do you feel that it is inevitable for cultures to evolve with the times?

Leng gets angry with Chang when he insists on bringing his books along to Canada. *“Are these old books really worth the shipping costs?”* (p 89). Chang values these books as they contain the knowledge, history and narratives written in *“the most intricate and regal language that the world has known”* (p 101). What is the value of books, writing and literature? What would happen if these books were destroyed or lost?

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The writing and literature of the Chinese and English cultures are juxtaposed to embody their respective values and worldviews. The Chinese books are described this way: *“the books themselves felt ancient, like stacks of hieroglyphed papyruses entombed in the sagging teak bookshelves”* (p 90). In contrast, the *“brand new English paperbacks”* are *“each designed and launched at the pre-teen market with the resources of multi-million dollar Anglo-American publishing empires”*(p 90). What is being suggested by these descriptions of the literature of both cultures? Does the diction suggest that English/American culture is in some ways inferior to Chinese culture?

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THE PLACE OF WOMEN

Annette finds the uniform of Fairleigh Girl’s School *“nothing like the scratchy, polyester-mix affairs she had to wear in Singapore. They made you feel glamorous rather than dumbed you down”* (p 87). What is the purpose of a school uniform and why should it not be *“too dressy”* (p 87)? Why does Chang disapprove of the uniform? What do you think Chang means when he says it is *“too dressy”*?

.....

Chang admits that *“he distrusted white girls”* (p 92). Why? He appears to be threatened by these *“female Goliaths”* (p 92) who are *“big, strong, beefy”* (p 91). To him, Sylvie is *“a gazelle among elephants”* (p 92). However, it is not just the physical size of the female students that he finds alarming but their *“peachy, rotund fecundity”* (p 92) — he finds them *“so matured”* (p 91). Chang suggests that his female students in Singapore *“grew up into proper women”* (p 92). What do you think he means by growing up into *“proper women”*?

.....

To Chang, women are no longer playing their traditional roles. What Chang finds uncomfortable is *“the thought of a world where a woman could go running for hours alone”* (p 93). The education of women and the heightened sexuality of “Western” culture results in an independence that women enjoy, but which disturbs Chang. The product of this freedom is Annette, his demanding, proud and superficial daughter-in-law who is described in reptilian terms as a chameleon and a snake. Chang is concerned that Sylvie will turn out the same way. *“She seemed to be running away from him, hurtling towards a kind of mechanised, modernised, Americanised future that had no place for people like him”* (p 93). Do you feel that Chang’s anxiety about the changing roles of women is justified?

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GROUP DISCUSSION TOPICS:

- In Canada, Chang is relegated to being the family’s maid, butler and chauffeur. To him, *“when he was younger, fathers-in-law were to be feared”* (93). He admits *“I’m old”* (93) and lives *“by their grace”* (p 94), that of Leng and Annette’s. After all, *“What else were old people good for?”* (p 94). With an increasingly ageing population, how should Singaporeans go about taking care of the elderly?
- How can someone so learned and well-read feel so inept in a foreign land? The narrator tells us that *“once he knew these few places, he never wanted to go anywhere else”* (p 96). Chang also grumbles that the food is not cooked right (p 98) and does not want to go out with the family (p 97). How much of Chang’s inability to adapt to a foreign land is of his own making? Is it his fault then that he feels so marginalised?
- Is there really a generation gap? Discuss your generation gap with your parents and with your grandparents. How do you think growing up as teenagers was different during their time? What issues do you not agree on? What do they seem not to be able to understand? Can this divide be bridged?