



## LITTLE IRONIES

By Catherine Lim

\$14.91 with GST, available in limited quantities at Select Books (tel: 6732-1515, www.selectbooks.com.sg). It can also be borrowed from most branches of the National Library; the call number is SING LIM

# Daily despair

**In the eighth of a monthly column featuring groundbreaking works of local literature, we look at Little Ironies, which exposes the cruel streak in human nature with humour and compassion**

When the stock market crashes and his hard-earned cash and "paper gains" go up in smoke, he dies of despair. For his funeral, his aged mother buys him a paper version of the house he had died for: "seven feet tall, a delicate framework of wire and thin bamboo strips... There was a paper swimming pool (round, as the man had not understood "kidney") which had to be fitted inside the house itself, as there was no provision for a garden or surrounding grounds." She sends it to him in the after-life by burning it.

In Lim's stories, the best-made plans of mice and men are foiled by fate, as well as people's own hypocrisy, selfishness or foolishness. Teachers are portrayed particularly badly in *The Teacher* and *Adeline Ng Ai Choo*, both stories about students who commit suicide, the warning signs all but ignored by their narrow-minded teachers who prefer to pick on their students' shoddy grammar and poor marks.

And there is the age-old conflict between the old and the young. In *Monster*, an old woman clings to her ancestral furniture even as her daughter-in-law complains of the bugs they attract. The daughter-in-



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**Catherine Lim's humour and compassion lift the depressing topics she writes about.**

law shows the old woman some respect in her dying days only when she realises that the monstrous bed the old woman sleeps on could be worth a fortune as an antique.

Not that this depressing book makes you give up hope entirely on humankind. Lim's humour and compassion shine through, especially in the stories which have an element of comeuppance or redemption.

## Doyenne of writers

Catherine Lim, 66, has published more than 10 collections of short stories, five novels, two poetry collections, as well as numerous political commentaries.

She has received local and regional prizes, including three National Book Development Council awards, the Montblanc-NUS Centre For The Arts Literary Award and the Southeast Asian Write Award. Her short stories have also been used as literature texts for the O levels.

She was made a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government in 2003, and in 2005 was appointed an ambassador of the Hans Christian Andersen Foundation in Copenhagen.

Born in 1942 in the town of Kulim in Malaysia, she received her Bachelor of

Arts degree from the University of Malaya in 1963. She received her PhD in Applied Linguistics from the National University of Singapore in 1988, and also attended Columbia University and the University of California, Berkeley, in 1990 as part of the Fulbright programme.

She immigrated to Singapore in 1967 at the age of 26, where she has lived ever since. Originally a teacher, she later became a project director with the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore and a specialist lecturer with the Regional Language Centre, teaching socio-linguistics and literature. She resigned to become a full-time writer in 1992.

She is divorced and has two grown children.

In *The Journey*, a man who has risen from his "ulu" village in Malaysia to become a prosperous businessman in Singapore discovers he has cancer. He ends up eschewing expensive treatment overseas to go back to his village, much to the horror of his Westernised wife.

The effectiveness of traditional medicine might be questionable but the love of the women who raised him is not.

Though Lim's short story collection could be seen to represent Singapore at a significant juncture of its development, it is more than a comment on a particular society at a particular time. It is also a timeless portrayal of human nature: the self-centred actions that govern us, the easy cruelties we inflict upon one another.

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### First Words

Stephanie Yap



As the doyenne of Singapore writers, Catherine Lim's trademark wit and keen observation is apparent in *Little Ironies* (1978), her first collection of short stories.

Poignant and dark, they tend to focus on a single character's thoughts and actions, with the full repercussions of the character's decisions revealed in a surprising, but never outlandish, twist only at the end.

About the everyday life of adolescent Singapore, the book portrays a people who are just beginning to learn to straddle East and West, tradition and modernity. A lot of the colour and drama in the stories centres on the practice of Chinese traditions, and how these ancient rituals reflect eternal elements of human behaviour.

In *The Father*, a dissolute man buys food for the grave of the young daughter he has beaten to death, even as his still-living children starve. In *Lottery*, a woman becomes obsessed with drawing 4-D numbers from random occurrences at the expense of practicality and propriety.

In *Paper*, one of the most heart-rendingly ironic stories, a man plays the stock market with the aim of buying his dream house, which he lovingly envisions "from the aluminium sliding doors to the actual shade of the dining room carpet to the shape of the swimming pool. Kidney. He rather liked the shape".