



## **Book Club Book of the Month: January 2020**

### ***In This Desert, There were Seeds*; various contributors, ed. Elizabeth Tan and Jon Gresham (Margaret River Press and Ethos Publishing)**

#### **Summary**

*In This Desert, There were Seeds* is a beguiling anthology of twenty short stories from West Australian and Singaporean artists. As part of an ongoing collaboration between Writing WA and the Southeast Asian literary community, the works loosely address the themes ‘challenges, hopes and joys for our future’ (WA) and ‘Our Imagined Futures’ (Singapore). Stories run for about ten pages each. They dip into past, present and future scenarios, and range in style and content from delicate, esoteric, sensitive and quirky to grittily realistic, disturbing and confronting. Settings vary wildly too, from arid deserts, claustrophobic apartments, and eerie aquarium hideaways to splendid temples. In all, the collection offers glimpses into a diverse range of cultures, lores and possibilities.

#### **About the author**

Like the stories, the background of the collection’s twenty authors and two editors is diverse. Eleven are based in WA (Alicia Tuckerman, David Wish-Wilson, Jay Anderson, Laurie Steed, Leslie Thiele, Rachelle Rechichi, Rashida Murphy, Sabrina Dudgeon-Swift, Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes, Tinashe Jakwa and editor Elizabeth Tan) and eleven (Heather Teo, Aishah Alhadad, Arin Alycia Fong, Chen Cuifen, Cyril Wong, Diana Rahim, Jinny Koh, Marylyn Tan, Rajkumar Thiagaras, Choo Ruizhi, and editor Jon Gresham) in Singapore. The cover is by Marie Toh. Brief biographies of authors and editors are included at the end of the collection.

## Questions for discussion

1. This anthology brings twenty disparate stories into a single volume. How might a story's being part of an anthology, as against standing alone in a journal or magazine, alter the reading of it?
2. To what extent do the stories express the collection's stated themes of 'the challenges, hopes and joys for our future' (WA) and 'Our Imagined Futures' (Singapore)? Is there strength in their disparity?
3. 'Gently Burns the Crescent Moon' is a poetic homage to a home. 'Walking on Water' describes the drowning of an island home by rising sea levels. In both, family memories are integral. Is family key to the concept of home?
4. At the end of 'A Minor Kalahari', Mr Tan swallows one of the two seeds he has kept. What might this signify? What might this story's placement at the end of the collection suggest? What are your thoughts about the cover design which is based on this story?
5. Compare the stillness of 'Glass' and the momentum of 'The Wave' in depicting a marriage's breakdown. How does each approach serve the story? Can the situation described in 'Contentment' – resignation to the loss of dreams – be preferable to the cutting of ties in 'Glass and The Wave'?
6. 'Dark Mulberry', 'The Slaughterman' and 'The Blue Leopard' all have highly atmospheric passages in which the setting is lush, visceral and menacing. What language or devices do the authors use? Compare these settings with the delicacy of setting in 'Gently Burns the Crescent Moon', the majesty of 'The Wave' or the claustrophobia of 'Vigilance Security'. What does setting add to each story?
7. 'Flies' and 'Dark Mulberry' each explore homophobia towards young gay males in small Australian country towns; 'Harihara', largely set in India, celebrates a transcending spiritual bond between two elderly lesbian lovers. What does the cultural backdrop bring to these stories? Could you imagine their settings transposed?
8. 'Flies' brings to mind the Indigenous AFL footballer and 2014 Australian of the Year, Adam Goodes, whose reaction to a racist taunt was widely condemned. How long should a person in a maligned or alienated sector of society be expected to 'suck it up'? How and when is it okay to react?
9. 'Death Lilies' looks at the 'engineered camaraderie' (p.78) of a group linked by newness to a country; 'Maqdala 1868/London 2018' describes the

- alienation of Ermi from his country's history. What is lost in moving from one country to another, whether by choice or by necessity?
10. Compare the very different treatments of living with the loss of a loved one in 'Purple Flowers', 'Harihara', and 'Sometimes Close, Sometimes Distant'. How deeply did each story resonate?

### **If you liked this book, you may also like...**

*Rubik*, Elizabeth Tan, Brio Books

*You Belong Here*, Laurie Steed, Margaret River Press

*The Historian's Daughter*, Rashida Murphy, UWA Publishing

*If I Tell You*, Alicia Tuckerman, Pantera Press

*The Coves*, David Whish-Wilson, Fremantle Press

*Bright Lights, No City*, ed. Sisonke Msimang, Margaret River Press

*Stories of Perth*, various authors, Brio Books

*Ways of Being Here*, Rafeif Ismail, Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes, Tinashe Jakwa and Yuot Alaak, Margaret River Press