

# TLC Showcase

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AUDREY CHIN

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## Introduction to *The Ash House*

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Despite being 2019 in the richest most developed city in South East Asia, there are still those ordained to cleanse it of spirits lingering from another time. Sister Mary Michael Rozario of the Sisters of Succour is one such agent of cleansing.

When the nun is sent to investigate a haunting in the Tjoa family's ancestral shophouse, she discovers a tangle of stories woven around Bing Fa, a long dead pipa diva purportedly trapped by the family's founder in a ghost marriage. There is the tragedy of Girl, an ambitious new maid who has travelled from her remote village to the house to earn enough to marry her village boyfriend; the garbled tale of Gran, the ailing grandmother who advises Girl to forget love and marry 'up'; the fantasies of Arno, the Barbie-doll fixated Tjoa heir who becomes obsessed with Girl; the leid-motif of a song sung by both Arno and his philandering alcoholic father; and finally, the mystery surrounding Irene Tjoa, the family matriarch who summons Sister Mary Michael to the ash house and proves to be the unsuspecting focus of the pipa diva's schemes.

A cross-over of Asian-Gothic fantasy and mystery, *The Ash House* explores love at cross-purposes and tilts a mirror at the lives of poor women in a society where an older world of Asian and Catholic beliefs clashes with 21st century manifestations of gender bias and social inequality.

The extract is from last third of the story, when Girl discovers Bing Fa has been lying to her.

I had completed a first draft and needed professional feedback. Fortuitously, the manuscript was selected for a critique by The Literary Consultancy under a bursary sponsored by Singapore National Arts Council's Manuscript Submission Scheme (MASS) and administered by SingLit Station.

Dr. Stephen Carver, an expert on Gothic literature, was my assigned reviewer. His feedback was supportive and to the point. For example, I was asked to remove front matter, re-position references, introduce an important protagonist much earlier, and to make another character more complex. I was in no doubt that Dr. Carver 'got' my story.

Dr. Carver was also kind enough to give some pointers on publishing in the UK, with a very specific section ticking off the boxes on how ready my manuscript was for publication. As I had particularly wanted this book to be published in the UK, the pointers were invaluable.

## Extract from *The Ash House* by Audrey Chin

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Girl ran down the stairs, out the front door and into the night. She ran between the pastel fronted houses whose flower plastered walls hid who knew what monsters, towards the wailing music and clinking glasses and hushed laughter at the bottom of the hill. She ran until she was stopped by a sudden silence.

She was in the courtyard of a bar, a barefooted crying maid clutching a doll house against her ripped t-shirt, with her bare ass showing through her ripped cloth. A sight strange enough to stop the bar-room chatter, for a moment at any rate. Then a metal chair slid against the tiled floor and a kindly foreign voice came towards her from underneath the dimly lit palm trees, asking, 'Honey, what's the matter? Do you need help?'

Before she could answer, a muscled body stepped between her and the foreigner and said, 'We'll take care of this, Sir.'

The second voice belonged to a very large man with long brawny arms that ended in two noticeably beaten up hands, the bouncer. He walked towards Girl with the soft feet and unblinking eyes of a snake-catcher. But he was surprisingly gentle as he steered her out of the bar and then took off his jacket and tied it around her waist, over her exposed bottom.

'What happened?' he asked, in a variant of her village dialect.

'BK Big Sir,' she whimpered.

'The son of the old woman who died last week?' the bouncer asked. Then without waiting for the girl to answer, sucked on his back teeth, and spat, 'That one. Again!'

Again... The word echoed through Girl's bruised body. Now she understood why Gran had refused to tell her if her son had been naughty. Now she understood Arno's warnings and the reason for the precautions Cook had made her take.

'Again? I can't let it happen again. We need to go to the police. Help me. Take me to them,' she said to the bouncer.

'Are you sure? You know what the police are like,' he murmured.

Girl hesitated. At home, no one went to the police if they could help it. And if they couldn't, they'd only go if they had something to bargain with. She had almost nothing now BK Tjoa had clawed and poked at her. Even if they were willing to take the stained scratched goods she offered, what would she gain allowing herself to be treated that way again? Not a marriage certificate. Not zeroes in a bank post book. And if the police were truly different here as people said. Well, all she'd get then would be unsatisfying cold justice. Nothing.

She squared her shoulders and tilted up her chin. 'No,' she replied.

The man smiled, showing his gold-capped teeth. 'Clever girl,' he said. He brought his hand under Girl's elbow, cupped his fingers around it and rubbed his thumb slowly but surely against the inside of her arm. 'Why give more of it away for nothing, isn't that right?' he said.

The Administrative Officer at home had touched Girl in the same way when he gave her back her doctored passport and bade her farewell. But she couldn't allow any of that. Not anymore. Not for nothing, certainly. She straightened her arm and pushed her elbow out. The bouncer let his hand drop without protest. It was then that she saw the heavy gold rings set with coloured stones on his misshapen hands and realized he wasn't merely a bouncer, he was also a broker.

She might have pulled herself up straight then, untied his jacket and flung it at him. She might have told him off the way her 'Mak or Bing Fa would have. 'You're right, why give it away for nothing? Come back when you can find me someone who'll pay a virgin's bride-price. Then, we'll talk.' But she wasn't her 'Mak or a pipa-diva. Instead she sank into her hips for a second, then turned on her heels and ran back the way she'd come, his jacket tied around her ripped cloth, the doll house clutched against her t-shirt, a breaker backwashing up the hill.

Halfway up the hill, she ran into Arno who'd come out looking for her. He shushed her, wrapped his shirt around her and walked her home like a baby, and then, with Cook, carried her over the thresh-hold and into the lift, up to the attic. They blew the air-mattress up and lay her on it in his work room. Cook wiped her clean. Afterwards, Arno gave her some of his pills and hummed Bing Fa's song to calm her.

She did not calm though. She dreamt she was running again, with Bing Fa's song

winding after her. The song wound past the pastel walls of the Green Hill houses and the mouldy walls of Cini shophouses and the click-clack of mah-jong tiles and the tinkling laughter of the girls in the bars at the bottom of the hill and the tink-tonk-tonk of wedding gongs and the Administrative Officer's 'shush' and BK Tjoa's chuckle and the bouncer's falsely friendly voice warning her against the police. It wound through the stones leading down to the riverbank and brushed at Girl's feet and calves and coiled around her right heel and sank its fangs into both sides of her ankle.

'You,' she said accusingly in her dream.

Bing Fa laughed. 'It's good to know you haven't given up and died after all,' she said.

'How can you laugh?' Girl asked, incensed. 'It's all happened because of you telling me to walk like water. It's all your fault.' And then, still dreaming, she'd stamped her feet down, hard

Her right foot clamped over something smooth and strong, a snake which spoke with two voices.

'Don't you feel better now?' the first said.

'So much more alive?' the second followed.

Girl looked down and saw a glowing yellow whip snake with two heads, one resting on each side of her ankle.

'You bit me,' she said.

The snake nodded, first with its glowing yellow-eyed head, then with its red-eyed head.

'Anger is powerful medicine,' the head with yellow eyes told her.

'Better than hunger,' the red-eyed head said.

'Or fear,' yellow eyes added.

'Who's talking about fear,' Girl said. 'I'm not afraid.'

The two heads reared. 'We didn't ask... Are you sure?' they mocked, their tongues

darting in and out.

In her dream, Girl knew she had her foot firmly set over the snake's body. All she had to do was press down hard and the snake would be dead. She was in control, like Gran had told her to be. She had no reason to be afraid.

But if so, why was one of the heads hissing, 'That's what she thinks.' And why was the other hissing back, 'Let her think what she likes, what she doesn't know won't hurt her.'

Girl knew snakes lied. And two-headed snakes were the greatest liars of all, the Cini in town used to say. This two-headed creature had come from Bing Fa, whom Girl was beginning to suspect was nothing more than a trickster. It had all been a waste of time, she thought angrily. She should kill the snake and get on with what she needed to do to earn her bride-price, the selling of her still intact maidenhood.

She pressed down with her foot. So there!

The snake body squirmed. The two heads around her ankle laughed. Something flipped. Something else pulled. 'You didn't think you could, did you?' she heard red eyes and yellow eyes saying in unison as the yellow body whipped away.

It had been free to leave whenever it wanted, Girl realized. It had only allowed itself to be pinned under her foot to give her the impression it was trapped.

Still asleep, she watched as the single tail of the snake swished between the stones of the riverbank and retraced its path to the ash house and up the marble steps to the attic, where it slid through the locked doors of the crocodile skin suitcase and into the doll house. The snake had come out from the trunk, followed her to the riverside and wrapped itself around her ankle, then gone back into the trunk as easily as Bing Fa's voice had entered her head. As easily as Bing Fa's strength had entered Gran's failing body. As her stories had seeped from the diva doll's body into Arno's imagination. As if it was free to go wherever it liked.

Free... Girl gasped as understanding flooded her sleeping body.

Bing Fa didn't need letting out from the doll house. She was already able to go everywhere. It was all a smoke screen, her story about promising anything to anyone if only they'd free her. Whatever it was that Bing Fa wanted, Girl realized, it wasn't freedom.

'Don't believe her,' Girl tried to tell Arno. 'Don't think we can ever be in control!'

But the pills he'd given her were finally doing their work. She could not get out of her dream. She managed to form her mouth into an 'o' and kick her feet feebly. But that was all she could do. She could not make her body do anything else.



## About the Writer

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Audrey Chin is a daughter-in-law of the Vietnamese diaspora and a descendant of migrant Chinese men and settled Peranakan women. She has worked variously in public policy think-tanks, investment funds and insurance companies and made her home all over the world.



Her writing, which draws from her in-between experiences, has been published in the US, UK, Singapore and regionally. Her two novels and an anthology of short stories - *Learning to Fly* (1998), *As the Heart Bones Break* (2013) and *Nine Cuts* (2015) – have been short-listed for the Singapore Literature Prize. *As the Heart Bones Break* (2013) was also nominated for the 2014 Dayton Literary Peace Prize.

*Singapore Women Re-presented* (2004), the essay collection she conceptualized, co-edited and contributed to, is the first to present Singapore's social history from the women's perspective.

Audrey is a Fellow of the 2017 University of Iowa International Writing Program, and her first work of literary translation of *Ode to the Quagga*, Stuart Lau's landmark poem about the tensions underlying Hong Kong's special administration status, will be published in the October issue of *91st Meridian*, the IWP's literary journal.

*The Ash House Ode*, her latest work, is seeking international agent representation.