

Book Review

Book Review: The Night Tiger by Yangsze Choo

Hassan Bin Zubair

PhD Scholar (English Literature), Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Hassan Bin Zubair, E-mail: hbz77@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

A sweeping historical novel about a dancehall girl and an orphan boy whose fates entangle over an old Chinese superstition about men who turn into tigers. When 11-year-old Ren's master dies, he makes one last request of his Chinese houseboy: that Ren find his severed finger, lost years ago in an accident, and reunite it with his body. Ren has 49 days, or else his master's soul will roam the earth, unable to rest in peace. Ji Lin always wanted to be a doctor, but as a girl in 1930s Malaysia, apprentice dressmaker is a more suitable occupation. Secretly, though, Ji Lin also moonlights as a dancehall girl to help pay off her beloved mother's Mahjong debts. One night, Ji Lin's dance partner leaves her with a gruesome souvenir: a severed finger. Convinced the finger is bad luck, Ji Lin enlists the help of her erstwhile stepbrother to return it to its rightful owner. As the 49 days tick down, and a prowling tiger wreaks havoc on the town, Ji Lin and Ren's lives intertwine in ways they could never have imagined. Propulsive and lushly written, *The Night Tiger* explores colonialism and independence, ancient superstition and modern ambition, sibling rivalry and first love. Braided through with Chinese folklore and a tantalizing mystery, this novel is a page-turner of the highest order.

Introduction

Malaysian-Chinese Yangsze Choo's best-selling debut historical novel, *The Ghost Bride* was set in late 19th century Malaya with an immediately compelling premise: a young Chinese girl is married off to a ghost. *The Night Tiger* is also set in Malaya, although in the early 1930s, but it lacks its predecessor's immediately graspable premise. Not that it should necessarily need one: *The Ghost Bride* was aimed at the young adult market, whereas *The Night Tiger* is adult fare, so a greater degree of complexity would be expected. Compared to other times and places in Asia, such as Colonial or Post-Colonial India, or China during the Mao years, Colonial Malaya William Somerset Maugham notwithstanding is a relatively under-explored setting in fiction for the international market. Choo also clearly delights in sharing her knowledge of Chinese and Malay folklore, traditional belief, and magical practices. As the title suggests, *The Night Tiger* particularly lingers over Malay ideas about weretigers. But it might nevertheless have benefited from a tighter focus on fewer of its many ideas. The two main plots revolve around a young orphan, Ren, trying to return his dead master's missing severed and preserved finger to his grave, within 49 days of his death. The dead master was a weretiger, and, with his body buried incomplete, his ghost is now wandering the earth. Returning his finger to the grave will free his ghost to become fully that of a man, and to rest in peace. Meanwhile, a young woman, Ji Lin, is working in a dance hall, to pay off her mother's debts. One night, during a dance, she acquires from her partner a preserved, severed finger. How Ren's and Ji Lin's lives intersect so that one can pass the finger to the other is the main plot-driver. But one of the several subplots concerns Ji Lin and her stepfather's son, Shin. It's soon obvious these two are going to end up romantically involved, and since there isn't anything stopping them becoming a couple, except that though genetically unrelated they are step-brother and sister, Choo has to work hard to keep them apart until the end of her novel. Ren's new employer, William, furthermore, has a taste for local women, a mysterious fiancée Iris, as well as Lydia, an English woman with designs on him. Choo holds back much information, in particular insights into Lydia's character, that,

had it been delivered earlier, might have made the resolution to this tangle more plausible. *The Night Tiger* is a galloping good read that's blessedly free of political polemics and post-colonial self-righteousness. Instead, what author Yangsze Choo has given readers is a darn good yarn replete with shape-shifting tigers, severed fingers, complex sibling bonds, an evil stepparent, vivid dreamscapes, thwarted love, a psychopathic serial killer, poison, and grave-robbing. To her credit, Choo manages to intertwine all these plots and subplots with themes of superstition, Confucianism, and the desire for personal fulfillment versus the tug of familial loyalty.

Altogether, a bravura performance. Set in 1931 Malaya, when Malaya (today's Malaysia) was part of the British Empire, *The Night Tiger* creates a world where wild beasts snatch victims in the night, numerology and homonyms impact key decisions, and dancehall girls adhere to a strict code of conduct while feigning interest in lonely men. The story begins when Ren, an orphaned houseboy charged by his dying master with finding the master's severed finger, sets out on his quest. Forty-nine days is all Ren has to locate the finger and bury it so that his master's body will be complete, and his ghost won't wander the earth forever. Crisscrossing Ren's tale are those of William Acton, a philandering surgeon who becomes Ren's new employer, and Ji Lin, a young woman chafing under her limited horizons as a dressmaker's apprentice. Time and again, the missing finger passes among them: surfacing, then becoming lost again, then found, then stolen, then buried, and finally reburied. Ren, William, and Ji Lin grapple with their own demons and with unseen forces they dimly sense operating just beyond the scrim of their own understanding. Each named for one of the five Confucian virtues in this case, wisdom, benevolence, and order, the three search for the finger, but also for the namesakes of the two remaining virtues: integrity and righteousness. It's this latter quest that leads them to a greater understanding of themselves and their relation to the other, thus-far-unknown members of their nascent Confucian quintet. Choo's skill in creating a dynamic, vibrant, non-Western cosmos rivals that of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Both authors open their books with a houseboy who serves as an objective onlooker while his own story unfolds. Both stories employ twins who become separated, and both have as their principal character a smart young woman. In *The Night Tiger*, that character is Ji Lin; hers is the only story told in the first person. Named for the Confucian virtue of knowledge, Ji Lin is smart but not wise. She consistently acts impulsively, gets herself into dangerous situations, and misinterprets other people's intentions, especially those of her stepbrother. Gradually, Ji Lin acknowledges her contribution to her own difficulties and achieves a measure of self-knowledge: "My own choices working at a dance hall, getting mixed up with a dead man's finger, and telling lie after lie could hardly be called wise, despite my supposed cleverness at school." Sadly, this insight comes two-thirds through the story, at a point where Ji Lin's almost willful purblindness has begun to sound deliberately disingenuous. Ren is a more sympathetic character, partially because his child's sensibility is malleable enough for him to trust his instincts. When his twin, Yi, died, Ren lost his "beacon," his "sixth sense." But through a series of dream sequences in which he visits Yi, Ren regains what he calls his "cat sense" and begins to experience the world with acute hyperawareness: "The dream recedes, like water flowing backwards, and most wonderful of all, his cat sense, that invisible, electric pulse which tells him about the world, is back, humming quietly in the background." Ren's porous sense of reality (and Choo's smart use of the present tense) gives his passages a propulsive vitality that grips the reader's attention. Ren doesn't know what is going to happen next, and neither does the reader. Conversely, Ji Lin relates her story in the past tense, but neither she nor the reader benefits from hindsight.

References

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