

Wine and manga a fine pair

Suzanne Mustacich and Dominique Chabrol

In the cobblestone square of Bages, a village in the Medoc wine country, a dozen influential Bordeaux vintners dressed in flowing red robes are gathered for an unlikely event.

The vintners from southwest France are about to induct two Japanese comic-book authors into their exclusive wine brotherhood, the Commanderie du Bontemps.

Yuko and Shin Kibayashi, a fashionable sister-brother duo publishing under the pseudonym Tadashi Agi, are the creators of *Kami no Shizuki (The Drops of God)*, a successful manga series that has sparked a wine boom in Asia.

The authors fell in love with wine the easy way: over an expensive bottle of Burgundy. Inspiration struck: they would go where no other manga artist had gone before ... wine.

In the four years since it first appeared, the multi-volume saga has sold 6 million copies in Japan and 3 million in Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, according to French publisher Editions Glénat.

In France, nine volumes have appeared, selling 350,000 copies. "This book is a real bridge between the two cultures: manga fans discover wine, wine amateurs discover manga," says editor Stéphane Ferrand.

"It's really well done," says Bordeaux winemaker Jean-Michel Cazes, who expresses admiration for illustrator Shu Okimoto and the accuracy of the information woven into the storylines.

"It's not my culture, but when I look at it, it explains wine very well. People learn about wine through the cartoons," Cazes says.

The story itself is universal: a rebellious son is forced to trace his father's footsteps. The hero of the saga knows little about wine, so readers learn with him.

The protagonist is the estranged son of a wine critic, who adopts a talented sommelier as a second son. The father dies and leaves a will that includes descriptions of 12 wines he considers to be the equivalent of Jesus' Disciples.

So far, six "disciples" have been found. The first son to find the "disciples" and the 13th wine, which the father calls the "Drops of God", will inherit the father's extraordinary wine collection.

"The Japanese love the ritual side of wine. In South Korea, they have even discovered that wine can be a diplomatic tool," Shin Kibayashi says. "Wine is universal, it can very well bridge differences between races and countries."

Meanwhile, the tale has proved pure marketing genius for publishing and wine sales; in Japan, the latter leaped 130 per cent the year *The Drops of God* appeared.

"People go with their book to the wine store, they show the page and say, 'I want that one,'" says Ferrand. "Passionate readers even organise tastings." *Agence France-Presse*

Few challenges come tougher for a writer, especially in Singapore, than being asked to write a short story about homosexuality – then to read it in public ... to members of a church.

That was the request made to author Suchen Christine Lim by the Free Community Church, one of the few places open to gay and straight worshippers in a city state where homosexual sex can still lead to prison time.

So on Christmas Day 2005, Lim read *The Morning After*, the story of a young man telling his mother he's gay, told from the mother's perspective. It's a familiar tale for Lim, herself the mother of a gay son. After the reading, she says, there was silence. "I knew the audience was listening to this story, but I didn't know it would be accepted with so much depth and feeling," she says.

"The first time I read it was at a special service in the chamber of Old Parliament House, where the government used to sit. I read, and the place was filled to standing-room only. At the end there was 30 seconds of silence followed by tremendous applause. I was told there were men crying because Christmas can be the loneliest time for gay men."

Lim's latest book is titled *The Lies That Build a Marriage*, a collection of 10 short stories that deals with subjects such as homosexuality, cross-dressing, adultery and prostitution, all in a Singaporean context. The author says the stories are based on true events witnessed either personally or by people she knows. It's not her intention to court controversy, but to point out that there are people and practices her book jacket describes as the "unsung, unsaid and uncelebrated in Singapore".

Born in Malaysia in 1948, Lim moved to Singapore when she was 14 and the city was still under British control. She admits to harbouring strong feelings against the colonial administration, describing herself as a "failed would-be romantic revolutionary".

"In those days as an undergrad I never dreamed of being a writer," says Lim at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.



Photo: Russell Wong

Suchen Christine Lim tells **David Evans** why her novels explore a side of Singapore that the authorities would rather hide

What lies beneath

Asia Specific

"I wanted to sell chicken porridge [congee]. But I also wanted a different Singapore from the one I grew up in. I wanted a more humane, gentler society. And I was part of a group of students who wanted to contribute to our new nation. But I felt the political reality in the end would say we were too naive, too idealistic."

Lim became a teacher and was in her 30s when she decided to return to university to finish her education and embark on a second career as a writer. "I was invigilating a three-hour English A-Level exam and was supposed to walk up and down. After a while you get tired and you sit at your desk, and I found myself doodling. And the doodling became scribbling, then words, a paragraph. And when I looked up 15 minutes had passed, and I thought I had better walk again. So I walked and came back and wrote. It became

the genesis of my first novel, *Rice Bowl*," she says. "The writing found me, not that I sought it."

Since then she has written 11 books, starting with *Rice Bowl* in 1984 and including *Gift From the Gods* and *A Bit of Earth*. In *Fistful of Colours*, the novel that won her the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992, she again confronted conservative beliefs. Suwen, a young teacher, escapes abuse and moves to a small town in Malaysia to become an artist; Nica lives with her partner and defies her father by pursuing a career in art rather than medicine; and Janice rejects her family's strongly held values and beliefs by marrying a Malay Muslim

journalist and moving to Singapore. As with *Lies*, her intention was to point out that, alongside the traditional middle class in modern Singapore, there are others who live alternative lifestyles.

"It was another writer who said, 'Unless we can see ourselves in books, somehow we don't exist'," says Lim. "If we do not use words to honour our experiences, it's as if we have discarded them. So if I write about these things and they are published, then I am honouring these people and giving them a voice. I'm not confrontational, I'm just saying this is my experience."

"They are observations from my childhood, otherwise I wouldn't write about them because my fiction is sculpted upon a slice of fact."

Lim is working on several short stories and another novel. She recently began a term as writer-in-residence at the Toji Literary Park in South Korea, where she lives in the former home of Park Kyung-ni, author of the 16-volume *Toji* (Land), who died last year.

"I'm writing a novel but I can't talk about it just yet. But I'll always be writing. I can't stop."

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