

Conversations with God, an Uncommon Dialogue, Book I

by Neale Donald Walsch

Published by G P Putnam's Sons

With new books pouring out in unending stream from numerous publishers, one becomes intimidated by the sheer numbers, never mind the value of most of them.

In this scenario when one's tastes and inclinations are Catholic it is difficult to select which books to read. The book I chose to write about is not the one I deliberately chose. I had glanced at it in Borders in Singapore but felt it would be too religious for me, an agnostic, and did not spend more than a few seconds on it. However, my son sent me a copy and told me I must read it; so I did and made a discovery.

How do you describe a book entitled *Conversations with God?* The author alleges that when his life, which he describes as a complete failure, reached a stage of near desperation, he sat down to write an angry letter to God to ask him why his life was in such a mess. When he finished writing he found that his hand was automatically forced to write thoughts that came into his mind not of his own volition and he was able to interject with his questions. The resulting questions and answers are the conversations with God.

After reading the book, whether you believe in a personal God or not, the answers are inspiring and turns the practices of established religions on their heads. He stressed that each individual is in full control of his life and that God does not influence directly in any way. This idea is consonant with the views of many philosophers such as Spinoza and Nietzsche, that each individual is in full control of his life and that God does not influence him in any way. Albert Einstein was quoted as saying, "I cannot conceive of a personal

God who would directly influence the action of individuals... My religiosity consists of a humble admiration of the infinitely superior spirit that reveals itself in the little that we can comprehend of reality." The conversations are more philosophical than religious in content and more acceptable to present day attitudes.

God, in this book, comes across as a completely different persona from what the established religions tend to make Him. As one reads the book, the ideas it sets out are so dramatically different from what most of us are taught to believe, that it enables us to have a new insight into old problems. Not being a religious person, I have often thought about the origin of our cosmos and what was the beginning of everything – where did it all start and how. How did the big Bang originate? What is space? And how was it created? That to me is the ultimate mystery that we would be fated never to know the answer – that I can only attribute to God.

There comes a time in our lives when one has to seek to understand what our life is all about and what we have done with it. One either accepts a religious faith or remains an agnostic. Many are agnostic today because they are unable to accept established religious teachings and practices which are polluted with human shortcomings. I think some of the ideas set out in this book may be more attractive to such agnostics.

If you have not read this book I would say try it and you would have no regrets.

Dr Lim Kee Jin

Personal History

by Katherine Graham

Published by Knopf, February 1997, 688 pages

I had heard about Katharine Graham a couple of years ago, when I was reading a book about Warren Buffett's approaches to successful investments. I was therefore extremely interested in her autobiography, *Personal History*, particularly when it won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize. The book does not disappoint. It is told courageously, and with complete frankness.

Katharine was born to Eugene Meyer, a wealthy Jew, who had bought the Washington Post for a song. She had a cloistered childhood, and at college did not even know how to wash a sweater. She married Phil Graham, a charismatic man, who took over the running of the Washington Post from Eugene. Katharine remained a shy, insecure person, until her marriage deteriorated. Phil suffered from manic-depression, and had an extramarital affair. Eventually he committed suicide, which shocked Katharine, and jolted her out from the back into the driver's seat. She took over the running of the Washington Post in 1963, a rarity for a woman in those days. Slowly she built it up to become one of America's top three newspapers.

She successfully navigated the Washington Post through

several crises, including the Pentagon Papers, Watergate, and the pressmen's strike. She was catapulted into the limelight as a result of her total backing for her two journalists, Woodward and Bernstein, for their investigations into the Watergate break-in. She was completely vindicated when President Nixon was eventually forced to resign. Her willingness to stand up for what she believed to be the truth, in publishing the Pentagon Papers and in reporting Watergate, despite considerable Government pressure for her to suppress it, reveals her immense courage.

The book is highly recommended for those interested in this era of American history, as well as an insight into American journalism. For readers outside America, her weekly magazine, Newsweek, is better known, and it continues to enjoy international success. Katharine has known scores of influential Americans, including several presidents, and is generous in her praise. Her autobiography is totally absorbing and she remains dignified throughout. For me, the book leaves a deep impression because it is her moral courage which shines through, and serves as a great inspiration.

The Horse Whisperers

by Nicholas Evans

Published by Delacorte Press, 1995, 404 pages

Sometimes one stumbles across a book whose sheer beauty takes one's breath away. I had not intended to read *The Horse Whisperers* by Nicholas Evans, as I had little interest in horses. When I saw it on sale recently, I picked it up almost as an afterthought. But as I started reading, I realised at once that this was an outstanding book. Unfortunately the film directed by and starring Robert Redford, does not do justice to the book.

A freak accident had crippled Grace, a teenage girl, and so severely injured her horse, Pilgrim, that it had become wild and completely unmanageable. Her mother, Annie, sensed that the rehabilitation of Grace and of the horse, were intertwined in some way. If the horse were to be put away, something inside her daughter was also going to die.

This is the setting for a heart wrenching story about suffering and how it is eventually overcome through love. The horse whisperer, Tom, is that rare person who can tame even the wildest horse. Annie sought him out to help restore Pilgrim's psychological health. He refused, but when Annie drove all the way from New York to Montana with the horse, Tom found

himself unable to refuse her a second time. Tom healed the pain in Annie and Grace's lives, and fell in love with Annie. But the affair was threatening to fracture the family unity.

This well-paced book is sprinkled with psychological insights. In a family of perfectionists, Grace complained to her mother Annie: "I felt you expected me to be so good at everything, so perfect and I wasn't, I was just me. And now I've gone and spoilt it all anyway." Annie held her more tightly and stroked her hair and told her this wasn't so. And she thought, but didn't say, what a perilous commodity love was and that the proper calibration of its giving and taking was too precise by far for mere humans."

Later, Tom explains to Annie, "Sometimes what seems like surrender isn't surrender at all. It's about what's going on in our hearts. About seeing clearly the way life is and accepting it and being true to it, whatever the pain, because the pain of not being true to it is far, far greater. Annie, I know you understand this."

The Horse Whisperers is a touching love story and the struggle against adversity makes for inspiring reading.

Tuesdays with Morrie

by Mitch Albom

Published by Doubleday, 1997, 192 pages

Morrie Schwartz, professor of sociology at Brandeis University, was slowly dying from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis; a fatal degenerative disease that robbed him of his physical strength, but left his mind intact. It is the same disease that Professor Stephen Hawking of Cambridge University has. *Tuesdays with Morrie* is an affectionate account of his old teacher by journalist Mitch Albom. He had a weekly tutorial on a Tuesday with Morrie, and learnt more than just academic subjects. He learnt about the philosophy of life.

Morrie was a brilliant teacher and mentor, much loved by his students. Mitch wrote, "How many students visit their old professors once they leave? Morrie's students did that all the time, and in his final months, they came back to him, hundreds of them, from Boston, New York, California, London, Switzerland; from corporate offices and inner city school programs. They called. They wrote. They drove hundreds of miles for a visit, a word, a smile. 'I've never had another teacher like you,' they all said."

Morrie once told Mitch: "Life is a series of pulls back and forth. You want to do one thing, but you are bound to do something else. Something hurts you, yet you know it shouldn't.

You take certain things for granted, even when you know you should never take anything for granted. A tension of opposites, like a pull on a rubber band. And most of us live somewhere in the middle."

"Sounds like a wrestling match," I say.

"A wrestling match." He laughs. "Yes, you could describe life that way." "So which side wins?" I ask.

"Which side wins?"

He smiles at me, the crinkled eyes, the crooked teeth. "Love wins. Love always wins."

On another occasion he told the author: "Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live."

Tuesdays with Morrie is a book that probes into the deeper questions of our existence, about the meaning of life. Mitch asks, "Have you ever really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine?" Morrie was such a teacher.

Even as he was dying, Morrie was imparting to his disciples about his experiences, his beliefs. He was giving his student advice how to live life to the fullest. He was indeed "A Teacher to the Last."

Singing in the Comeback Choir

by Bebe Moore Campbell

Published by Putnam Pub Group, Feb 1998, 400 pages

Singing in the Comeback Choir is a truly uplifting and inspiring book. Bebe Moore sensitively portrays African-Americans, their ambitions and their struggles. Maxine McCoy, executive producer of a TV talk show, reminiscent of Oprah Winfrey, is pregnant, her husband has just ended an affair, and her grandmother, once a famous singer, has just had a near stroke. When the friend who had been looking after grandmother moves away, Maxine returns to her childhood home to take care of grandmother. Unfortunately, she finds a devitalised, heavy smoking and drinking grandmother. In the meantime, Maxine's talk show begins to dip in the Nielsen popularity ratings, and the show's very existence is now in jeopardy.

To help grandmother regain her zest for life, Maxine persuades her to take up singing again, and arranges a televised concert. This is harder than she imagined. The book creates quite a strong suspense whether or not grandmother will succeed in coming back to give the concert.

Philadelphia, the setting for the book, is also where I lived for a few years, and I found the descriptions of this city very credible. The characters are adroitly drawn, the dialogue true to life, and the subtle emotional shifts are beautifully captured. I love this book. It is eminently readable, and I found it hard to put down. Strongly recommended.

Dr Kenneth Lyen

The Giant Leap: Mankind Heads for the Stars

by Adrian Berry

Published by Headline, London, 1999, 310 pages

The viewers of Star Trek and shows of that ilk confuse wishful fantasy with what one can expect by a genuine extrapolation of present day scientific knowledge. One might imagine that any book on the prospect of travelling to the stars would fall into the Star Trek category. Adrian Berry, however, avoids the pitfalls of wild speculation and fruitless day dreaming. His is a serious exploration of the 'how' and 'why' of interstellar travel.

The star nearest us is Alpha Centauri which is 4.3 light years away. At the current speeds of space travel, it would take us more than the three million years that hominids have existed on the earth to reach it and colonise its planetary systems. The only way that mankind can reach the stars is to discover a system that will transport us at something just short of the speed of light. To find such a method of propulsion seems impossible since even in nuclear explosions only one percent of the fuel, fissionable matter, is converted into energy. Yet Einstein's equation has shown that $E=mc^2$ (squared); matter contains the energy of its mass multiplied by the square of the speed of light. In fact, all our use of matter to produce energy fall far short of that which is possible and what will be necessary for travel to the stars.

To travel across light years, we will have to utilise all the energy stored in matter and this is enormous. Light travels at 300,000 kilometres per second. Taking that as a number, not a measurement, its square would be 90 billion. There is enough power locked up in a kilogram of matter to send 9000 giant rockets to the moon. How to release it is the problem. Berry has a suggestion as to how this can be achieved.

In 1930, a British physicist Paul Dirac, proposed that a new kind of matter could be envisaged whose atoms and electrons had an opposite electric charge to ordinary matter. The concept of antimatter was initially considered more metaphysical than real. A short two years after Dirac's proposal, however, Carl Anderson, of the California Institute of Technology, discovered a particle which, in a magnetic field, travelled in the opposite direction to an electron. It was known as a positron. The existence of antimatter was established.

When particles of antimatter collide with matter, all the energy contained in both particles is released. If a nuclear explosion released

one percent of the energy contained in matter, collision between matter and antimatter would release two hundred percent; a hundred from matter and a hundred from antimatter. Antimatter can be produced... but with difficulty. In present atom smashing machines some twelve antimatter hydrogen atoms have been created. For a one way trip to Alpha Centauri seventy tons of it would be needed. With the progress of technology, however, we realise that what is impossible to obtain today, is expensive tomorrow and is a household item the day after. Think of the track record of computers.

Berry goes into all the details of the problems of interstellar travel. In the course of this he explains much of what is mysterious in modern physics. After reading the book I could, at last, conceive of time and space as a continuous dimension, what black holes are about and the possible fate of the universe; all this because of his no-nonsense style and his ability to explain without assuming that his reader has a knowledge of physics or mathematics. The 'how' of the feasibility of travelling to the stars is made explicit but the 'why' is arguable.

What Berry suggests is that such travel will have commercial advantages. The ultimate commodity is time. Time contracts as one travels near the speed of light. A voyage that took ten years would enable us to return to an earth two hundred years after we left it.

Berry claims that an investment made now would increase to such an extent as to make interstellar travel financially worthwhile. This I believe is simplistic and demeaning of the human spirit.

We are curious by nature and wonder what is on the other side of the hill. Some twenty or thirty thousands years ago (I am always uncertain about dates) people from China walked to the north pole and across the land bridge which is now the Bering Strait. They drifted through the continents to the tip of South America, terra del fuego, which is the last bit of land between us and Antarctica. No one has provided a plausible explanation for this movement.

For want of an explanation, I cling to my faith that the human spirit which makes us wonder what is on the other side of the hill motivated their wanderings. I am convinced that this same spirit will carry us to the stars.

Dr Gopal Baratham

Dubliners

by James Joyce

Published by Bantam Books Paperback, 1914, 182 pages

Reading *Dubliners* is like walking in a part of the Botanic Gardens which is called "Rain Forest" on a late afternoon, after it has been drenched by a bout of rain. Unlike the rest of the manicured Gardens, it is a piece of raw jungle, vegetation in harmonious disarray, almost untouched by the pretensions of horticulture. There is a bald bitumen track running through it and a solitary light bulb somewhere near the farther end of this track that punctuates the forbidding darkness when daylight ceases.

The cold, wet air brushes sweat and rushes past your face. The mint-like balmy admixture sends refreshing caresses down your arms and legs. Tiredness does not set in. The cadence of steps is met regularly by the reassurance of unhurried breathing. Up above, light breaks through the rain-laden canopy of leaves and gives the impression of a motif of pale ivory inlaid with varying elliptical panels of green jade. With each step, a thin film of rainwater squeaks faintly between your shoes and the hard ground underneath, reminds you that the veins of silver seemingly coursing through black granite before you is but water fallen, fanned out and scattered on the sombre, peat-coloured ground.

A sudden whisper of the wind resonates through the air, and the branches high above reply with a sluggish shrug, sending drops of old rain hurtling down. A chilly drop or two hits you, catches you unawares, maybe sears past your face down and across, like a vicious slap. You instinctively wipe the wet rage away with your arm.

Suddenly, you realise you are not walking very alone.

"James Joyce is so inaccessible!" so said a Harvard graduate in English Literature cum President Scholar friend to me, "I am so glad I don't have to ever go back to his works now that I have graduated". My last proper English lesson was in Secondary 4 and I am in no way as brilliant as she. I was really quite discouraged by this piece of feedback which I considered to be the equivalent of expert opinion. But like *RJ Last and Anatomy*, the beauty is in the reading and not the studying. I read *RJ Last 4* times.

Dubliners is about "dear, dirty Dublin" by possibly the greatest novelist of this century. A Dublin at the turn of the last century, wallowing in self-depreciation if not pity, of which James Joyce grew up in and at once both loved and hated. Now at the turn of yet another century and millennium as well, *Dubliners* still lends itself to many thoughtful readings. Each of the 15 short stories encapsulates a different facet of Dublin. All of the 15 short stories ring true beyond Dublin. They all reach timeless "epiphanies" (as Joyce would call them), the moments of revelation: the cold drops of rain that hit and shudder the reader back to introspection from mere literary enjoyment. And then you realise "*Dubliners*" could well have been "Singaporeans" or "Those around me and I".

In "Counterparts", a man suffers unreasonable umbrage from his employer and returns home inebriated. He beats up his son, becoming what he beheld. In "After the Race" the young and rich Irishman James Doyle, trying to ascend the social ladder by rubbing shoulders with equally young and rich but 'superior' Continentals: two French men. Here, Joyce mocks the inferiority complex of the Irish of that time. The two thirty-something aimless, penniless young men in "The Gallants", chronically unemployed and trying to land a girl by hanging around street corners. The very ordinary family man, "Little Chandler" unable to accept his station in life, ends up torn between feeling guilty about his wanderlust dreams and frustration against his immobility. The emotionally obtunded Duffy in a "Painful Case": he spurns the love of a married woman who in turn becomes an alcoholic. She dies heartbroken in pious Ireland. Who is the more deserving of pity, the physically dead, the alive but deader or are both equal victims of religion and social norms? And then there is

Mrs Kearney, the apparently well-bred lady who turns ugly and throws all decorum to the wind when she thinks her daughter has been exploited. Her unreasonable fury abetted by an obese husband in "A Mother".

You will find all these in and around us: from the obsessive mother to the obese husband; from the 'gallants' whistling at girls in a HDB Town Centre to the Singaporean James Doyle trying to speak with a pathetic pseudo-American accent; the drunkard beating up his wife after too many Singapore brewed-under-license stouts; and the little Singaporean Chandler feeling trapped by his mortgages, family obligations and above all, his commonness.

But to only confine *Dubliners* as a wordsmith's caricature of the little folk is belittling. *Dubliners* is more. And this is best said with reference to my three favourite stories found towards the end of the book: "Ivy Day in the Committee Room", "Grace" and yes, the finale, if there is such a thing as finale in a short story collection, "The Dead". Ivy Day is a reflection of the paralysis of indifference in the Irish political scene. Four small-time political activists, three are opportunists with no true political ideology, gather together for a drink. Here, Joyce uses the character Hynes, an Irish nationalist to personify his resentment against the Church for what he saw as destructive dabbling in Irish politics, against the English and most of all, against the apathy of his fellow Irish. The pathos is in the apathy.

The fourteenth short story "Grace" is the original last short story in *Dubliners*. It really is a lament on the religion of the day: the reluctance of establishment-pandering religion to come clean and be honest about the total depravity of establishment folk.

Finally, we have the "The Dead". Gabriel, the middle-aged professional, deadened by society but strives half-heartedly to break free of the trappings of materialism. Gabriel, the Irishman is ridiculed by his classmate as a 'West Briton' for actively eschewing the Irish culture, not unlike the Singaporean Chinese who cannot speak Mandarin or any Chinese dialect and is proud of this inability. Gabriel, the repressed man and his mid-life frustration over his inability to even love his wife fully and his realisation that he can never compare favourably with the youth who died for her many years ago. He feels threatened by the dead. A piteous and damning "This must be love" by him near the end of the tale acknowledges that he has none. At the same time, Gabriel admits and envies that the dead youth did know and experience what which has eluded one who has seemingly lived longer and richer: true love. Ironic that the dead seemed to always reach mythological perfection while desiring none, while the living are always seen to be so crassly imperfect while they crave acceptance. The vanities and vagaries of life and death all painted here in 40 pages.

I have to differ with my Harvard friend. Perhaps Joyce is inaccessible in *Dubliners* because we are inaccessible to ourselves. The spirit of *Dubliners* is not only accessible, it is here. As a book, *Dubliners* is a door that leads outside to the rain of introspection and self-realisation, beyond the confines of emotional and psychological barricades we have so meticulously erected over the years.

But *Dubliners* is not just a testimony against the malaise of an old city written almost a hundred years ago. It is also a voice of hope that *Dubliners* will take "one last look at themselves" (Joyce). To this end, I think he has already succeeded. One only has to take a walk as I did last year, down bustling Grafton Street, St Stephen's Green and Merrion Street in Dublin, places commonly mentioned in the book. The optimistic and lively Dublin of today and the dreary Dublin of *Dubliners* are so vastly different that one can surmise that *Dubliners* did indeed take a good look at themselves after all.

Dr Wong Chiang Yin

An Instance of the Fingerpost

by Ian Pears

Published by Berkeley Books; New York

I was delighted with the opportunity to write on *materia non medica* and quickly agreed to recommend something that I had enjoyed reading recently.

East is new, and a refreshingly intellectual Singaporean. But, it is lifestyle magazine and therefore did not fit in with the Editor's specifications of a book. I enjoyed Mr Lee Kuan Yew's book about himself and his times immensely, but you would not need me to tell you about how good it is! Anaesthetists, who generally have some time on their hands between intubating and extubating, came to my rescue and I was the happy recipient of a brand new book to read, review and keep!

The heavy black covers and mysterious title were not immediately appealing. If you are wondering, the title was derived from a quote attributed to Francis Bacon. This is a murder mystery, set in the 17th century, and Oxford and its University form much of the setting. The story is told by four witnesses, in the first person. Ian Pears very successfully crafts four separate writing and cognitive

styles, for four very different personalities – a Venetian gentleman student of medicine, a student son of a traitor, an Oxford mathematician and cryptographer and finally, another Oxford don, an historian.

Women's colleges did not exist in the 17th century, but New College and several others did. I spent three memorable years in this ancient city, and was, in reading this book, happy to be constantly reminded of familiar geography, their age and well preserved traditions. Cadaveric dissections, vacuums and physiology of respiration, early pharmacology, blood circulation and the first attempts at blood transfusion will keep the doctor in you interested. There is learned theology, with bible quotes and counter quotes, all this interwoven with codecracking, armed resistance, intrigue at the highest levels, the politics of Cromwell and the restoration of the monarchy.

This book is a marvellous history lesson and riveting with a murder mystery.

Dr Yeoh Swee Choo

My Own Country

by Abraham Verghese

Published by Simon & Schuster

When the editor of the Singapore Medical Journal invited me to write a short review on a book I would recommend a colleague, I was duty-bound to honour the gracious request. However it was mixed with trepidation as it is presumptuous to recommend a book to learned colleagues who are known to me. But to paraphrase Blanche DuBois' famous last words in Tennessee Williams' play "A Street Car Named Desire", "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers". Therefore I decided to write this piece to an unknown colleague who had no prejudgement of the writer. During the past year of reading, 3 books kept surfacing into my consciousness. All are autobiographies which have a common resonance, the struggle of the human spirit against adversity, and in the process, an understanding of the purpose of existence. These books were written by disparate people, each seeking his own truth and salvation. Pope John XIII into his collected diaries "Journal of a Soul" poured his heart and spirit, and the journal becomes the revelation of a saint who transformed his church, with the effects still being realised in this and in the coming Age. The other book is Frank McCourt's "Angela's Ashes"; the story of a depression-era Irish American boy in Brooklyn, who returns with his family to a greater depression in the Western Irish City of Limerick. Amidst the squalor and grinding poverty he dreams of returning to the American promised land. His story is told with that rare Irish gift of language, with humour within the tears. The book I finally recommend after much difficulty in choosing is *My Own Country* by Abraham Verghese, an immigrant doctor in America who had made his odyssey to the American dream from India via Ethiopia. It is his story, but beyond and above himself, it is the story of a people, the town in a land of mountains, and the invasion of these pastoral homes by the modern plague AIDS. It is the story of a simple and dignified people amongst whom the good doctor had made his own home, with his wife and young family.

The doctor writes with great gift of prose and I was carried through the pages of the story and could put the book down only when it was finished. But the story remains.

The intertwining narrative of the homecoming of a son in the late stages of AIDS to his family, their initial incomprehension and fear overcome by love and compassion is a moving testament to love and familial bondage. The homosexuals in isolated social communes, the secret lives of bisexual husbands, and the innocents who had received contaminated blood; and the loneliness of the long distance truckers, with furtive trysts along the highways of the Appalachian mountains are painted in non-moralistic and moving words by the good physician. It is a joy to read this beautiful and moving book, and to realise the difference a good doctor can make to the community when he has no judgements or prejudices, but only the ministrations of the good physician. *My Own Country* had the same impact on me as an earlier biographical novel by another doctor, A J Cronin in *The Citadel*. One book set me on the path to medicine, the other made me nostalgic for the loss of the grace in human contact that is sacrificed by the pathologist in his discipline. Abraham Verghese writes lucidly of the effects of the mountains and forests on man's primeval connection to his sense of eternity. This has been lost in an enclosed city where immortality is believed to be accorded by the opinions of an enclosed and self important elite. The heart of *My Own Country* is redemption, with AIDS as another visitation by the Apocalyptic horseman that mankind continually has to struggle against. Doctor Abraham Verghese reminds us what the healing profession should be. I hope the reader will accept this essay on my book selection as a private opinion and not a sermon on good reading.

Professor Raja Sinniah

Half of Man is Woman

by Zhang Xianliang

Published by Penguin Books, 1989, 253 pages

Zhang Xianliang was born in Nanjing in 1936. In 1955, the poet-writer fell victim to the 'anti-rightist' movement and was sent to a labour reform camp. *Half of Man is Woman* was published in China in late 1985. It is about a political prisoner in a labour camp. It is also about love and impotence. It was published before the crackdown on writers. As part of the crackdown, Zhang's latest writing was banned. His work was considered vulgar. One of Zhang's main themes is that China's political system has desexed its population. Zhang was put in jail at the age of 21, ostensibly for writing poetry. *Half of Man is Woman* is one of the best books I have read. Apart from the political undertones, it is a book dealing with the human condition in captivity. It is about human resilience, survival, love, lust and impotence with beautiful poetry in between. The novel has a bitter sweet refrain throughout. It is certainly one of the saddest I have read, yet beautiful and melancholic, comparable to the writings of Mishima and Kawabata. But instead of the Japanese ambience, it has the Chinese ambience subtly woven in. This is a personification of the Asian mind.

Zhang sees a woman naked for the first time; a prisoner in a female labour gang bathing in a flooded paddy field. He himself was also a prisoner. She was bathing. Not daring to go into the middle of the water, she stood on a clump of grass near the bank of the far side. With cupped hands, she teased the water up over her body, splashing her neck, her shoulders, her waist, her hips, her stomach. Her body was lithe and firm. From between the two walls of green, the sun shone straight on her body, making her wet skin shine like stretched silk. To a man, that skin was exceedingly touchable – especially her breasts, shining with a wet lustre, moving as her body moved, two delectable shadows curved under those breasts.

Eight years later, they met again when both were freed prisoners working on a State farm and they married. "Come," she said. He pulled down the bedcover, and there before him, exactly as he had seen it in the reeds, was her beautiful body.

The first struggle of mankind was not between man and man or man and beast. The earliest struggle was that between man and woman. It demanded not only strength, but a vital spirit, using emotions and some innate artistic sense in its struggle to find balance, to reach unity and harmony, to achieve wholeness while maintaining its own separate self.

In this struggle, Zhang had failed. His body was covered with sweat, as though he had stepped out of a bath. "You're hopeless!" She had told him.

He discovered that he was only half a man.

He tried many times and failed. She had asked him, "What kind of man are you? You have no manliness at all. If you were a real man, I wouldn't mind if you beat me all day!"

Zhang thought of committing suicide, since he was already 'a cripple', already 'half a man'.

One night when Zhang was out, he saw Cao Xueyi walking towards his (Zhang's) house. As Zhang stood astonished from a distance, he saw Cao pushed open the door of his house and quickly stepped inside.

"So it had finally happened," Zhang told himself. His legs gave way as he sat down hard on the top of an oleaster root. Of all the insults and humiliation he had received in his lifetime, this was the worst.

He accepted his fate since he himself could not fulfil the obligations of a husband. They lived together in two separate rooms in the house. He did the man's chores and she the housework. It

was a peaceful co-existence.

Some years later there was a flood. He joined the volunteers and because he could swim he risked his life to plug a hole in the ditch in the midst of raging flood waters. He was commended for bravery. He became a hero. When he came home that night, hungry and exhausted, he almost fell as he came through the door. She sprang towards him, deftly removed his wet clothes and tucked him in. She scolded him for being a fool telling him he could have died. Only someone like him would go out and risk his life like that. As she babbled on, warming him and feeding him with hot soup, he detected genuine concern in her voice. She massaged his stiff and cold body and the skin on his arms and chest began to relax and warm up. He felt a delicious shiver run through him. Her face was floating before him.

She patted his cheek. "Oh, feel that! Your face is still freezing cold, come, put it between my breasts".

She ripped open her blouse and two large mounds of milky white bared themselves before him, two lotus-like breasts. In the middle of each was a peony red pistil. Both breasts and their red centres were larger than he had remembered, more fresh, more exciting. He felt something he had never felt in his life before. Was this love? His arms reached out to wrap her body

"You're well." Her voice floated up from the depths of deep water.

"Yes, I am. I didn't know myself" and he laughed. The sound became louder, until his whole body shook and he cried.

But they had been apart for too long. When two souls could not respond to one another, any spoken words were insufficient. What had held them together was the excitement of physical need; it was simply the contact of flesh against flesh. The love that they had felt came only from that feeling of pleasure – without it, they had lost both understanding and concern for one another.

She told Zhang, "Here you are, so educated, and you've been cheated in your own home. You have your reasons for suffering. Best to divorce and split up quietly." Zhang told Xiangjiu that she'd be fine alone, that she was still young. She should find someone better than him.

"She was still beautiful enough to bewitch a man" he told himself. She gave him \$200 and kept \$300 for herself from their joint savings, insisting he took it. She then pressed her body against his. Her full breasts were against his chest, as she said in a hot commanding voice, "On the bed! Tonight I want you to take me, so you'll never forget me."

The moon had risen until it hung high in the sky. As the light was put out, the moonlight poured into the small room like a waterfall.

She told him that he had betrayed his heart and will not die well. No matter how many people there were weeping at his grave, the only mourning would be her.

He felt two hot burning arms wrap tightly around him, pulling him down – deep into the bottom of the lake in the moonlight. "Don't forget, I'm the one who made you into a real man...."

A woman is the most lovable thing on earth,

But there is something that is more important.

Women will never possess the men they have created.

"Afterwards, I'll burn money for you every year at Qingming," she had told him. "Would he return to her side to accept her memory?" he asked himself.

A/Prof Woo Keng Thyne

The Wild Duck

by Henrik Ibsen

Published by Signet Classic

Like Ibsen's other plays including the popular literature text, *A Doll House*, *The Wild Duck* can be explored at various levels. On a superficial level, it is an entertaining read, with enough scandals and twists to win the approval of any Hollywood director.

The premise of the play actually dates back some 17 years involving 2 business partners, Werle and Ekdal, who pursue a failed venture. While Ekdal shoulders the crippling legal and social consequences, Werle is acquitted and manages to manipulate his way back into high society. An unfaithful husband who married for money, Werle has a daughter (Hedvig) by his former housekeeper whom he subsequently marries off to the unsuspecting Ekdal's son (Hjalmar).

The play itself follows the attempts by Werle's son (Gregers) to right the wrongs, by exposing his father's deception. Gregers' obsession to opening Hjalmar's eyes to the truth yields tragic consequences culminating in Hedvig's suicide.

Visually, the setting shows up the different worlds in which the 2 families live. Act I is in Werle's house where a bawdy party attended by court officials rages. The remaining 4 acts are in Hjalmar's studio where they struggle to make ends meet.

Even within the studio, the divided setting broaches on the interplay between reality and illusion. The Ekdals eat, work and go about their business of daily living in the foreground

where all activities are controlled by the conscious mind. The background is an inner loft, where rabbits and pigeons are kept among a few old christmas trees. In this make-believe hunting ground, old Ekdal prowls with his pistol, reliving the glory days when he was a respected hunter and lieutenant. The unconscious mind roams free in this shadowy, elevated setting where time is suspended and the play takes on a mystical slant.

The themes dealt with in this work are based on ambiguity between contrasts such as reality and illusion, truth and lie. It does not seek to delineate and provides no absolute solution to happiness, but suggests compromise and acceptance of life as it is, chequered. Another pervasive theme is that of disease. The obvious afflicted characters are: Ekdal who is alcoholic and delusional; Werle whose principles are crippled; Hjalmar who is a self-centred victim, not so much of Werle's atrocities as of his own exaggerated poetic sensitivities. Even Gregers himself suffers from "moralistic fever" as Dr Reilling, Ibsen's voice in the play, puts it. In fact, his insidious illness is the most dangerous one as it robs the Ekdals of the only happiness and stability that they know, the lie on which their family is based. Dr Reilling further suggests that the cure for depression in this corrupt world is a "vital lie", that every man should be allowed the luxury of believing in a fantasy that will give him something to live for and a direction to strive towards.

Ms Jade Kua