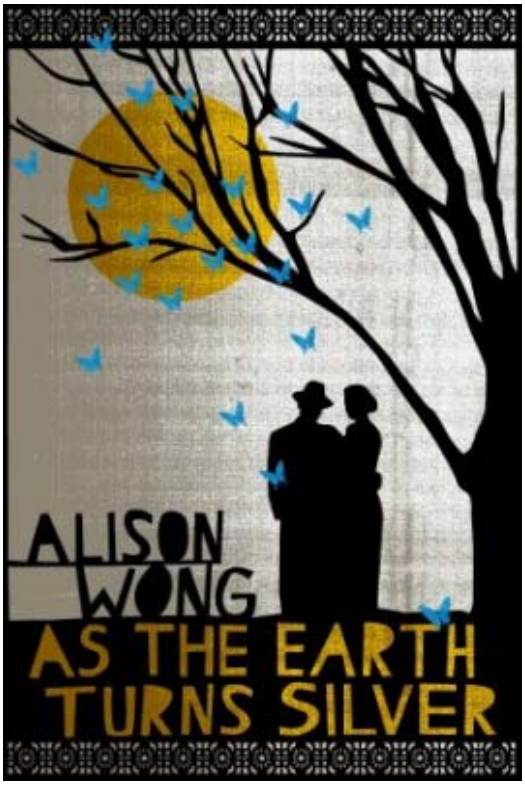
PICADOR

AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS

Alison Wong

AS THE EARTH TURNS SILVER



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

CONTENTS:

THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'People died, he told her, because they were afraid. They did not go out at night on dangerous water. They did not see the earth as it turned overnight to silver.'(p 150)

Katherine McKechnie is a product of her times and of the country in which she was born. For although New Zealand was the first country in the world to give women the right to vote in 1893, by the early years of the 20th century it was still a country in which women were oppressed by conservative attitudes, and whose people had yet to fully accept the rights of different ethnic minorities, or of the indigenous Maori. Katherine is dominated by her husband until his death leaves her with two children to support, and a need to re-discover who she is. But Katherine could never have suspected that a Chinese immigrant might be her savior.

Chinese-New Zealand relations and racism underpin the action in this novel, which traces the interaction between the McKechnies, a New Zealand family of European origin, and two Chinese immigrant brothers, as a way of exploring the tensions between the two communities. The prologue establishes the life of Wong Chung-shun (Shun) who in 1896 is joined in Wellington, New Zealand, by his 18 year old brother Wong Chung-yung (Yung), who is fifteen years younger. It is over ten years since Shun had left China, and he has lived a hard and lonely life. Having saved enough money to give Yung an exceptional education and then bring him over, Shun is at last able to save to bring a wife from China. Although Yung is a scholar he spends the decade working with his brother in their Wellington fruit and vegetable store, and without his Chinese wife and son. He finds himself in an environment in which members of his race are deeply ostracized, although their services and goods are much in demand. The Chinese view the white people as 'ghosts', and the latter dismiss the Chinese as lesser beings. Katherine's husband Donald is typical of many who were then prejudiced against the 'aliens'. As a journalist working for *Truth*, which was a particularly racist and sensationalist 'rag' in an era when most newspapers were quite racist, he is comfortable in expressing his views. He is chauvinistic towards his wife and daughter, Edie, but dotes on his son Robbie, who worships him. Donald agrees with his new-found friend Lionel Terry's prejudiced statements (pp 23-24) about the Chinese, and when Terry's murder of Joe Kum-yung (p 28) brings tensions to a head, incredibly Donald

McKechnie approves of Terry's actions in shooting the Chinese man. 'How could they not agree on the Asiatic problem?'(p 31) Even Katherine, despite her growing appreciation of Yung, thinks to herself: 'He didn't *really* look Chinese.'(p 85) Later she realises that she still hasn't asked his name: 'But no one knew the names of the Chinese.' (p 124) Even the enlightened Mrs Newman, who employs the widowed Katherine, is prejudiced: ' The Chinamen undercut us with prices that would put a decent working man in the poorhouse…They suck the country dry …' (p 147) When Katherine later confesses to her secret love she is warned: 'Did you know that if you marry a Chinaman you lose your British citizenship?'(p 147) Robbie's grief over his father's death is compounded when he learns of his mother's relationship with a Chinese man, and eventually he is driven by disgust and rage to kill him.

Colonialism created a range of attitudes, vestiges of which remain deeply ingrained in many people to this day. Lionel Terry's prejudice towards the Chinese is just as ardent as his dismissal of the claims of Maori people (p 26), and both are founded on notions of white supremacy. The gradual loosening of the bonds of empire were like the letting go of childhood and reliance on a benevolent but autocratic parent. 'For a moment she saw a lopped-off globe with no continents or seas, a world that had lost its shape. And all its boundaries.'(p 40) The search for home or for a connection with place is symbolically explored constantly in this novel in which the theme of self-actualisation is intimately connected with this conflict. Displacement and alienation are two of the facets of migration which the Chinese characters struggle to escape from, and both brothers' feelings of displacement are clear. At the novel's heart therefore, lies the fact that both Katherine and Yung are seeking a spiritual home, which they find in each other.

Women's rights are another theme. Katherine McKechnie is an unhappy wife trapped by her husband's demands: 'All of Donald's women were *Lepidoptera*: either a moth to the flame or merely part of his silent collection.'(p 21) Her life is ordained by the attitudes of not only men, but of women like her mother and mother-in-law, who actively support the notion that women should be subservient and not be encouraged to be curious or highly educated. 'Beat it out of her now, Donald, before it's too late. What man will have her if you don't nip it in the bud?'(p 39) Going out to work is frowned upon: 'But married women did not have careers… It would have been shameful for Donald if he could not provide.'(p 60) Both Shun and Yung's Chinese wives, too, are bound by male conventions: 'The woman lived and died – in the style of the severely married.'(p 182) But the times are beginning to change with New Zealand women having already achieved the vote, and with leading figures in the Women's Movement encouraging younger generations. Mrs Newman is incensed by the Dr Batchelor's address regarding the proper education of girls (p 77) and declares that Edie will never suffer such restriction, and that she'll assist in her education (p 80). Edie's later success in becoming a doctor represents the promise of the future. With the disintegration of the Ch'ing dynasty in China and the rise of Sun Yat-sen and the Republic, even Shun's New Zealand-based concubine, Mei-lin, hopes for a better future

'because in modern China she hoped that women would also be educated, just like the wife of Sun Yat-sen and her sisters.' (p 117)

The power of words and language is a persistent idea in this novel. Katherine admits that Donald suppressed her, by using 'language and power against her' (p 178). Her symbolic act in burning his dictionary (p 66) is driven by a desire for her own words, and for her own form of communication. She is fascinated by the Chinese writing of Yung: 'A name, she thought, has a sound which disappears, and now also a physical presence, a shape on skin, an apparition.'(p125) Later she asks Yung 'for a Chinese name, an opening into his language, a window into his world' (p 126), and when he does, the words are a poetry which is irresistible (p 132). Katherine's first job after being widowed is as a typist and secretary to a philanthropic emancipist but it is from Yung that she learns that 'If you master language, you master the world' (p 221).

This is also a deeply romantic love story. Yung meets and expresses kindness to the widowed Katherine by giving her an apple (p 48). Over years (time periods of years in the novel are often covered in only a few pages), within the confines of the shop, they develop an ease and friendship with each other. It is only after falling in love with Katherine that Yung realizes Robbie (who is one of a gang of kids who had been tormenting he and his brother) is her son. 'Kind-heart, bad-luck woman. Mother of a red head bad-heart boy. Wife of a dead man.' (p 87) They try to keep their distance from each other but realise that the attraction is inescapable and they become clandestine lovers. Yung is obsessed with Katherine and she is also deeply in love: 'and now there was no other reason for being. Except for him to fill her. And fill her.'(p 138) But when Imperial rule in China is overthrown, Yung is torn by the choice: 'the homeland he had waited for, worked for, prayed for; or this neverending ache, this last sigh of breath at the end of the world.'(p 160) His love for her has given Katherine a new sense of herself: 'He'd given her language: his language, a new opening into her own. And he'd brought her home in her body. He'd brought her home.'(p 236) And Yung no longer knows whether his long held dream to return to China is still valid. 'Suddenly he did not know where might be home.'(p 183)

Ultimately this novel is about overcoming fear and embracing new experience; it's about being open to life's pleasures and to people from a variety of cultures. It is clear, though, that such bravery is not without its perils, for both Katherine and Yung suffer for their love. The novel also makes clear that some people are so bound by their society's conventions that it is almost impossible to free oneself. (The plight of the two Chinese wives is a case in point. In contrast, Mei-lin, 'the concubine' manages in this new and freer society to make some kind of life for herself and to rebel somewhat against conventions which might have taken her son from her.) It's a novel about making the most of life, before it's too late. 'Then he told her there were two ways to die…One was… [Inevitable]…The other way he said, this inside death, was not…inevitable. People took it in their hands, they held it and would not let go.'(p 150) Katherine defies conventions which

might have bound her to a form of living death, to find a new contentment, albeit one tinged with loss and grief.

WRITING STYLE

1. **Structured** in several chronological parts, the novel details the years from 1896 to 1922. Within these parts, the novel is told from **different narrative perspectives**, in which voices change and we are given an insight into the stories of other people apart from the main characters, particularly into the thoughts of the two wives of the two Chinese brothers, and of Mei-lin the concubine of Shun. How do these shifting insights influence the reading of the novel?

2. The novel is in one sense **a work of historical fiction** in that the author has drawn on real events and then extrapolated from them to imagine fictional characters inhabiting the space around them. (Lionel Terry did exist but Katherine McKechnie didn't.) It is therefore a work of 'faction'. A writer faces certain challenges in confronting the boundary between fiction and fact and there have been some often heated debates about this in recent coverage of both Australian and New Zealand post-colonialist fictions. Read the author's article 'Writing Historical Fiction from a Cross-Cultural Perspective' a seminar by Alison Wong on 2 April 2003 <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/The-Chinese-in-New-Zealand/Whats-New/Writing-Historical-Fiction-from-a-Cross-Cultural-Perspective.html> Discuss the novel as a work of historical fiction.

3. **Poetic description and symbolism** is used throughout the novel, for example, of the white people as ghosts (p vii), or the description of the onion as 'a globe' (p 40), or of Yung's death (p 215). When Mei-lin withholds conjugal rights from Shun, he reflects gloomily: 'Fish in water, that's what they were – what they had been. But now he was cast out into the wet streets with nothing left to draw him back in.' (p 109) 'Fish in water' is a Chinese metaphor which can be used specifically to describe a good sexual/marital relationship, and here he's describing his anguish at the loss of this relationship. Discuss passages or phrases you found particularly rich in imagery.

4. **There is a juxtaposition in the novel of the ordinary detail of lives and the inner life of the mind which is very suggestive**, with some phrases or words, operating as a form of thematic sub-text. Amongst them is the novel's title, for the ordinary act of looking at the moon on the water (p 150) becomes a philosophical moment. Discuss this interplay between the mundane and the spiritual as a device in the novel.

THE AUTHOR

Wong, Alison (1960–) is a poet and novelist. Born and raised in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand, she has a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics from Victoria University of Wellington and is a graduate of Bill Manhire's Original Composition class at the same university. Apart from several years in China, Wong has spent most of her adult life in greater Wellington where she has worked as an information technology analyst and writer. Her first collection of poetry, *Cup* (Steele Roberts, 2006), was shortlisted for the Best First Book for Poetry at the 2007 Montana New Zealand Book Awards. *Cup* is described by Megan Fleming in *The Lumiere Reader* (14 February 2006) as, being 'mostly accessible: there are the details of domestic moments, the wonder of a new child, the falling out of love – but she lends these subjects a humble and attentive form, drawing the reader in, to rest in the space between.' In 1996 Wong held a Reader's Digest-New Zealand Society of Authors Fellowship at the Stout Research Centre and a New Zealand Founders Society Research Award. In 2001, she received a Porirua City Council Civic Honour Award for co-founding and running Porirua's Poetry Cafe. Wong was the Robert Burns Fellow at the University of Otago in 2002. Her poetry and fiction has been widely published in anthologies and literary journals and magazines such as, *Landfall*, *Sport*, the *New Zealand Listener, Meanjin* and *Cha* (Hong Kong). Her poetry was selected for *Best New Zealand Poems* 2006 and 2007. Alison Wong lives at Titahi Bay, Porirua, and has one son.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Lionel Terry testifies that he murdered Kum-yung ' to protect the rights of Britons against alien immigration' (p 33). The Chief Justice who hears the case is a fellow member of the Anti-Chinese League. Compare this situation to similarly racist attitudes in Australia which directly led to the implementation of the White Australia Policy in 1901.

2. Some of the events in this novel relate to actual events. Whether fictional or factual, the novel deals with the relationship between Chinese and Europeans in Wellington. [You may wish to read more about some of the issues raised in this book, and some of the events, and to discover some more background about the Chinese in Wellington in articles such as Lynette Shum's 'Remembering Haining Street with Both Eyes Open' *Chinese in New Zealand* <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/The-Chinese-in-New-Zealand/Current-Historical-Research/REMEMBERING-HAINING-STREET-With-both-eyes-open.html>

Photos of Chinese people in New Zealand can also be found at: 'Chinese' *Explore Te Ara: the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* <http://www.teara.govt.nz/NewZealanders/NewZealandPeoples/Chinese/3/EN Z-Resources/Standard/4/en>

3. Mrs Newman 'could never resist organizing and bettering other people's lives. She considered it a form of patronage, her own experiment in eugenics.'(p 63) But this attitude doesn't extend to people of other races. How liberal minded is she really? Does being liberal minded in one social area necessarily militate against prejudice in another? Discuss.

4. Even after Mrs Newman makes her views on Chinese people known, Katherine stays with her, since she enjoys her work, and the freedom her generous remuneration gives her. Is Katherine's lack of challenge to the arguments of her employer a sign that, despite having grown as a person in the course of the novel, she is still deeply divided or uncertain in her opinions of Oriental people? Or is her silence more an indication that, despite personal growth, she still finds it difficult being assertive with dominating personalities? Discuss.

5. Katherine sees Yung's son in the shop but makes no attempt to speak to him. Having bridged the gap with Yung and later with Mei-lin, she can't communicate with him for a number of reasons. Discuss.

6. 'It is a lonely place where the Jesus-ghosts preach. They preach about love, about a god who died of love, yet in the street the people sneer and call out and spit, then on Sundays sing in the Jesus-house.'(p v11) This statement offers a comment on hypocrisy, for the novel makes a distinction between genuine spirituality and some common interpretations of religion, which can be hypocritical and /or inflexibly dogmatic/inhumane and divisive. Spirituality may be present with or without institutionalised religion. Discuss.

7. 'He said Maoris were dying. In fifty years they would be wiped out…' (p 7) The notion of 'a dying race' was one shared with regards to the Indigenous people in Australia at the time. Discuss with reference to the facts.

8. 'Almost a decade, and he'd barely spoken to a Maori.'(p 8) Because of the lack of Maori in the cities at the time, Yung had not met many, but his interaction with the customer and also in his first brief encounter with the group who smiled at him, are both suggestive

of the close bonds which some Maori formed with the Chinese, whom they viewed as their brothers in being oppressed by the Europeans. You may wish to research and discuss this relationship further.

9. 'She could see a tree stump –the end of life, all the rings of its history.'(pp 39-40) Generational change and the past's influence on the present is suggested too in the novel. The author is writing from a past which has been influenced by these sorts of events; by the divides which were manifested in such spontaneous and fatal actions as those of Robbie. Have we learned from such a history? Discuss.

10. Chinese politics and economic necessity are the background to the two brothers' move to New Zealand. Yung supports the cause of Sun Yat-sen (p 117), the events leading to the death of his friend Hung-seng (pp 157-8), the eventual successful uprising against Manchu rule and declaration of Sun as China's first President. Read about the politics in China during the period covered by this novel. 'China' <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China#Dynastic_rule> Might Yung have found any contentment in returning home?

11. In one part of the novel the effects of opium are poetically described (pp 110-1). The British forced opium on China, using warships and cannons, and then denigrated those who became addicted, considering them 'filthy' and 'sinful' for their opium addiction and gambling. Chinese gambling was not unlike modern day Keno, Lotto and poker but in those days it was illegal and considered a vice while horseracing for Europeans was completely acceptable. Research and discuss.

12. World War One wrought irreparable damage on many who fought or served in some capacity. Robbie's experience was not unique. Discuss.

13. 'Perhaps intelligence was not a blessing. More a test of character.' (p 40) Discuss.

14. 'Let the wind change. For once, let it change.'(p 59) Is this ultimately a hopeful novel? What positive changes are wrought in the lives of any of the characters?

15. 'Goodness begets goodness… For consequences.'(p 205) How does this rhyme relate to the novel's themes?

16. 'Grief comes softly behind her… She will turn and there he will be. He will wrap his arms round her neck. He will ask her to embrace him.'(p 260) Is this ending a bleak one, or is there a sense of acceptance and even promise in this embrace of the griefs of the past?

AS THE EARTH TURNS SILVER

Alison Wong

Picador Australia
Trade paperback - ISBN: 9780330424882

Pan Macmillan Australia
Level 25, 1 Market Street,
Sydney NSW 2000

www.panmacmillan.com.au