FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

Shadow Theatre
Fiona Cheung
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Behind the tropical mists of the author's Singapore lie secrets, ghosts, and broke hearted women who guard the past close to their chests. This novel is a beautifully written exploration of modern Singapore, as seen through the eyes of the women of a small village.

The book hinges on the homecoming of Shakilah Nair, who returns to her home pregnant and unmarried after fifteen years in the United States. The speculation surrounding her situation unfolds through the voices of the neighbors, friends, and observers who make up her Singaporean world. In a style reminiscent of Toni Morrison, Cheung's various narrators, each with her own preoccupations, present small slices of the mysterious secrets that the village hides. The story does not so much flow as evolve, while each woman discloses her past, her present, and her own interpretations of truth.

Singapore itself is an unnamed character in the novel, imbuing the story with a cultural richness in which vampires and medicine women do not seem out of place. Cheung's characters speak in a dialectical mixture of Malaysian, Chinese, and English words; their cultural beliefs draw from legends of both the Eastern and Western worlds. Without becoming sentimental in her prose, the author gives Singapore-often known for its authoritarian regime-a subtle beauty and delicacy.

Having grown up there, Cheung successfully conveys a tangible sense of what childhood and life must be like in Singapore. She contrasts the old women who make puppets for a traditional theatrical performance with the young Singaporean women chasing after GIs from the local military base. Shakilah herself suffers from prejudice because of old ways of thinking that are in contrast with her modern Western values.

This is a lovely and exotic novel written by a talented woman. Her previous novel, The Scent of the Gods, was published by W.W. Norton and received attention from the New York

Times Book Review and Publishers Weekly. Though heartbreaking at times, her new book is memorable for its strong characters and haunting story.

Johanna Massé