

Well Lit.

life
&
times

Love's labour's lost

Love and long-distance running dominate in Jeremy Chin's refreshing debut effort, one that **UMAPAGAN AMPIKAIPAKAN** hopes to be just the first of many more

Fuel

by Jeremy Chin
256 pages/CreateSpace

I DO love when writers write what they do not know. When they step out of what is familiar and comfortable and craft fiction from fiction. Because those tales are often the most poignant, they are often the most engaging. They have universal appeal. Because they are unburdened with the weight of experience and memory. They are free from all the hindrances of the author's history. They do not carry with them anything preconceived. No prejudice. No bias.

I do love when Malaysian authors venture to tell us stories that aren't rooted in our politics or the shackles of our communalism. I like it when they brave the long form of fiction. When they focus their attention to telling a story for that purpose alone.

This is one of those

books. A remarkable freshman debut that is ambitious while at the same time constantly aware of its own limitations.

Jeremy Chin tells us the story of Timothy Malcolm Smith, a somewhat prodigious advertising man, a long distance runner, a man with far too many ghosts — of a family long departed, of loves lost, of dreams unfulfilled.

He has his mind set on winning the New York marathon. He has his heart set on winning that of Cambria Sarah Lane — his protegee and one true love. Jeremy Chin tells us of his journey as he seeks to achieve both these things.

Throughout this novel, I found myself a keen observer of the ins and outs of long distance running. I found myself develop an interest for the sport. It left me feeling the same way Haruki Murakami did in his autobiographical *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. Because

Chin writes with a similar passion. So much so that you begin to share Timmy's obsession. So much so that you can relate to his every apprehension, irrespective of whether you've ever put on a pair of running shoes.

Throughout this novel, I



was a welcome voyeur on this new and burgeoning love between Timmy Smith and Cambria Lane. From the moment he captured his "true love snapshot" to the moment she captured hers. From their casual flirting. From the uncertainty that

constantly plagued both their minds. There was a slow and deliberate pace to its telling. It was cunning. It was necessary. It built up a force that would eventually hit you like a speeding locomotive.

I did have some reservations. But they were entirely with regards to style. Most of the novel is told in the third person. Chin pulls this off well. He is concise. He is quick. His occasional sidesteps are well thought out and welcome.

But there are a few chapters in the book that inexplicably shift the narrative into the first person. They are what I assume to be an attempt at getting into the minds of our protagonists. And they feel entirely unnecessary.

In fact, they fell a little out of place. Like something from an initial draft that was mistakenly left in the final proof. It is an abrupt shift in tone that threatens to defocus what is

otherwise remarkably tight prose.

That being said, I could not put this book down. I read it in one sitting. I kept eagerly turning the pages. Because Jeremy Chin is clever in layering his story. He doesn't rush you in any way. He gets you invested, slowly, purposefully, and without you realising. Because Jeremy Chin does well to create rich and believable characters. Their motives and motivations entirely real. Their every action coming as no surprise, their every reaction rooted in their own past, in history that he has crafted well.

It must be said that there are no great revelations in *Fuel*. There are no deep philosophical insights. No philippics against God. No "I returned home only to find what I was looking for was there all along" moments. All there is, is a great story, and wonderfully told. What more could anyone possibly want?