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## Of love and learning

House Of Koi reminds readers, sometimes, your future is waiting for you in your past.



SEVERAL years ago, author Lilian Li was very homesick. She had left home in Penang to the United States, where she studied at the University of Boston.

Home was so far away, and to cope, Li started to write. Soon, she realised she had quite a story on her hands. A professor in her creative writing class even helped her to form her stories into what would become a book.

In Dec 2019, her book, *House Of Koi*, was launched by US-based publisher New Degree Press.

Li, who had just turned 21 at the time, was overwhelmed.

“At first, writing was a way for me to cope with my homesickness. I never thought I would get published. Even now, I can hardly believe people are reading my words,” said Li, via email interview. It was perhaps no surprise that Li would end up an author: ever since she was young, she had been extremely devoted to books.

“I grew up surrounded by books, and by that I mean I have literally been inside a bookstore for an entire day until the lights in the shopping mall went out and the bookstore had to politely tell me to get out.

“But I would return the next day. My parents had a store next door (to this bookshop) in the mall, so while they worked, I lived and breathed books,” revealed Li, whose favourite authors are Sarah J Maas and Meg Cabot.

*House Of Koi* is a young adult (YA) book about identity, family and change. It is the tale of Mila, a young girl from Penang. She studies at an international school, speaking only English and mixing with an international crowd.

Due to circumstances, she ends up having to move to Bukit Mertajam to

live with her grandmother, and go to a local school.

Being the new kid is never fun, especially in a school where most students speak Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin, and you don’t.

Mila experiences complete culture shock.

Thanks to her friends, including cute next door neighbour Sean, Mila slowly begins to adapt. But the journey is difficult, and Mila has to confront some truths about her past.

“I’ve never read a Malaysian young adult high school romance before, let alone based in my home Penang, so I decided to write one. I thought about my own childhood and my struggles. I felt very drawn towards creating a character with that same internal struggle of searching for identity in such a multi-racial place as Malaysia,” said Li.

Much of the story is based on Li’s actual experiences. Like her main character, the author also underwent a shift of worlds

She did the opposite of her character, going from a Malaysian school to an international one.

Li also drew on her bond with her own grandmother to write about Mila and her grandmother.

“I decided to stay with my grandmother before I went abroad as I wouldn’t be able to spend time with her. As a way to remember everything we did together – from picking vegetables, going to the morning market, eating rambutans – I recorded all down,” said Li.

Li’s grandmother unfortunately died before her book could be published. *House Of Koi* is peppered with Malaysian references, with real life Penang buildings playing a role in the story. Characters go to hawker centres, drink “Milo Dinosaur”, play with “pop pop” firecrackers, and watch the movie *Cicak Man*.

The world of Malaysian secondary school is captured honestly and poignantly, and will definitely invoke nostalgia in older readers.

“While writing this book with a US publisher, I also had to remind myself who my audience was. My editors didn’t understand some of my scenes or certain dialogues, but I decided I didn’t want to cater towards non-Malaysians. I wanted this story to be for Malaysians written by a Malaysian,” said Li, who is studying advertising, with a minor in English. The book took about a year to write. To finance the book, Li ran a successful Indiegogo fundraiser, eventually raising over RM16,000 for it. Will there be a sequel? Li said readers had suggested a story where Mila goes to university abroad.

“I think that would be a good idea. But for now, I am quite happy with the way the book ended. Perhaps, because writing Mila’s university life hits too close to my current life,” said Li with a laugh.

The young author’s immediate goal is to graduate from university. Her studies have been delayed because of the pandemic, and she is currently working in an advertising agency.

She is also working on another novel. It will be a Malaysian-influenced tale about the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac.



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