

For Review only

Oddballs,
Screwballs
& Other Eccentrics

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Oddballs, Screwballs & Other Eccentrics

WRITTEN BY FELIX CHEONG
ILLUSTRATED BY CHERYL CHARLI TAN

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For Dad and Mom, in remembrance and love.

— Felix

For Jan, and to my family, Ahma and Auntie Lis.

— Cheryl

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Foreword

This is paradoxically the easiest and hardest book I've written.

It came about by accident last year when I chanced upon Cheryl's artwork she had uploaded on Facebook. (Although we were Facebook friends, we didn't know each other formally.) Child-like but threatening, macabre but mischievous, they depict characters crying out for their stories – and back stories – to be explored and told.

To say that I took to these sketches is an understatement. It was more like they had hacked into a past I thought I had double-locked long ago.

I was suddenly 14, the quiet observer always apart from my class; I was the "Beatles freak", as my classmates nicknamed me, who thought it funny to sign myself off as John Lennon.

I was again 17, so socially inept in junior college I terrorised girls by being too upfront with my emotions. And I was 22 once more, floppy-haired and still misplaced in the university, dressed like a New-Wave wannabe with an equally clueless sense of fashion.

In many ways, these poems, taking a through-line in my reading of Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Roald Dahl, Tim Burton and Edward Gorey, are very much me as an oddball, screwball and eccentric.

The writing of this book also bookended my parents' death, both from pneumonia, three weeks apart – Dad in December, Mom in January.

It was a difficult time, after the grief and guilt that I had not taken enough care of them over the years, to pick up the pieces. But continue the pen did, and it found strange ways to ink my mourning. Several poems that reimagine the afterlife, such as “Auditioning in the Afterlife”, “Instructions from St Peter at the Pearly Gates” and “The Self-Harming Ghost”, came from this period.

Oddballs, Screwballs and Other Eccentrics is nothing like what I’ve written before. And I hope it’ll be an experience with poetry you’ve never had before.

— Felix

“This house has many hearts.”

— *Poltergeist* (1982)

I would like to say that these aren’t exactly ‘happy’ characters. These weird drawings are born of a certain loneliness and sense of entrapment that I did not and still do not know how to deal with. I started drawing these characters during a rather confusing and painful part of my life that I am still stumbling through. I suppose in the middle of the chaos, I simply needed to do something – anything – to bring to life these little imaginary friends that were circling in my head.

Like every other normal kid, I spent great deal of my childhood happily raised on horror films. I’d spend endless weekends with my aunt and my grandparents watching *The*

Exorcist, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, *The Omen*, *The Ring*, and *Storm of the Century*. I was an 11-year-old who walked around seeing that old man from *The Poltergeist 2* on overhead bridges, who’d walk into rooms and “sense” things, who’d sit playing with my imaginary friend (Rebecca) whom I never really told anyone about until now (Hi, Rebecca).

Fairytales taught me dreams come true. These stories were all well and important, but horror films taught me about darkness. That sometimes the monsters under our beds and within ourselves have their own stories to tell — stories that need not be confronting, but are worth listening to.

Although it is easy to imagine that the collection of freaks in this book were plucked out of a fictional universe, Felix and I had decidedly set out pretty early on to not romanticise their lives or give them conventional ‘happily ever afters’. We wanted to tell stories we felt were relatively absent in our local literary canon — stories that weren’t told enough that desperately needed to be told. So while some of these poems are considerably dark, I hope you find some truth or semblance of comfort in them. I hope that our imperfect creatures housed within the pages of this collection will hopefully make you feel less alone in your own darkness too.

So come on into our house. It may be dark, but do not be afraid.

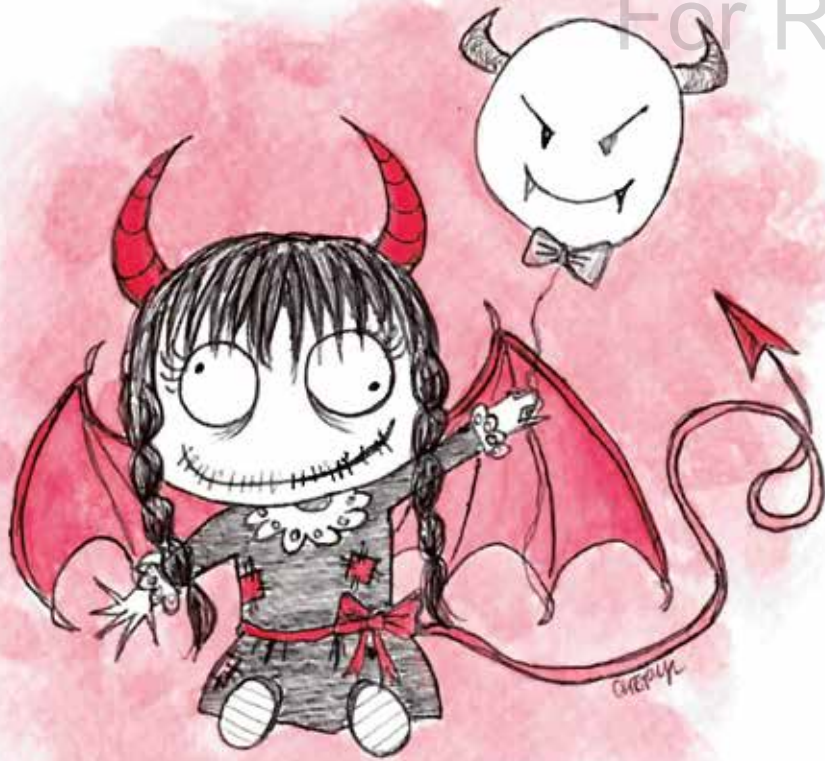
They’re here.

— Cheryl

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If you've ever had that feeling of loneliness,
of being an outsider, it never quite leaves you.
You can be happy or successful or whatever,
but that thing still stays within you.

— Tim Burton



Baby Questions

~~~~~

“Dada, what are my horns for?”

Carve your name on classroom walls.

Pick the lock of boyfriends’ doors.

Gore your way through crowded stores.

“Dada, why do I have wings?”

Flap a breeze when heatwave clings.

Save on fare for flights in spring.

Slap the mouth that makes a din.

“Dada, why is my tail long?”

Reach for things that don’t belong.

Tie up bags till airtight strong.

Whip the ass who did you wrong.

~~~~~

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Captain Hook's Childhood Dream

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I've wanted to be a pirate since young.

It beats being humdrum.

I want to work the decks, skin sun-stung,

Read the wind, beat the drum,

Learn the songs, down the rum.

By hook or by crook, I'll make Mum

See my life belongs to the sea and sun.

I will not accept any crumbs

But captain my own ship, in time to come.

Look, I even have the eyepatch and stump!

~~~~~



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Darwin the Champion Sperm Cell

~~~~~

If you want it badly enough,  
Find it in yourself to be tough.  
Shut out the goody two-shoe fluff.  
Work your body, do the hard stuff.  
Tune your voice low and make it gruff.  
See yourself coming through the rough.  
Ignore those who say you are daft.  
Do this and you'll have the last laugh  
When you are the first to make love  
To that cute egg in the buff.

~~~~~

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Sticks and Stones

ASPCA

Mommy thought it funny to name me Eve
Since before Christmas Day I was conceived.
She was still laughing when she heaved,
Pushed me out so hard she almost cleaved
And didn't notice the afterbirth serpent leave.

ASPCA

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Incommunicado

~*~*~

When your lips have been sewn from young,
Through a pen you hear your own tongue.
Your words have become lines unsung
And held up to the light and hung.
It's a mixed blessing that has sprung
A writer who gives silence lungs.

~*~*~

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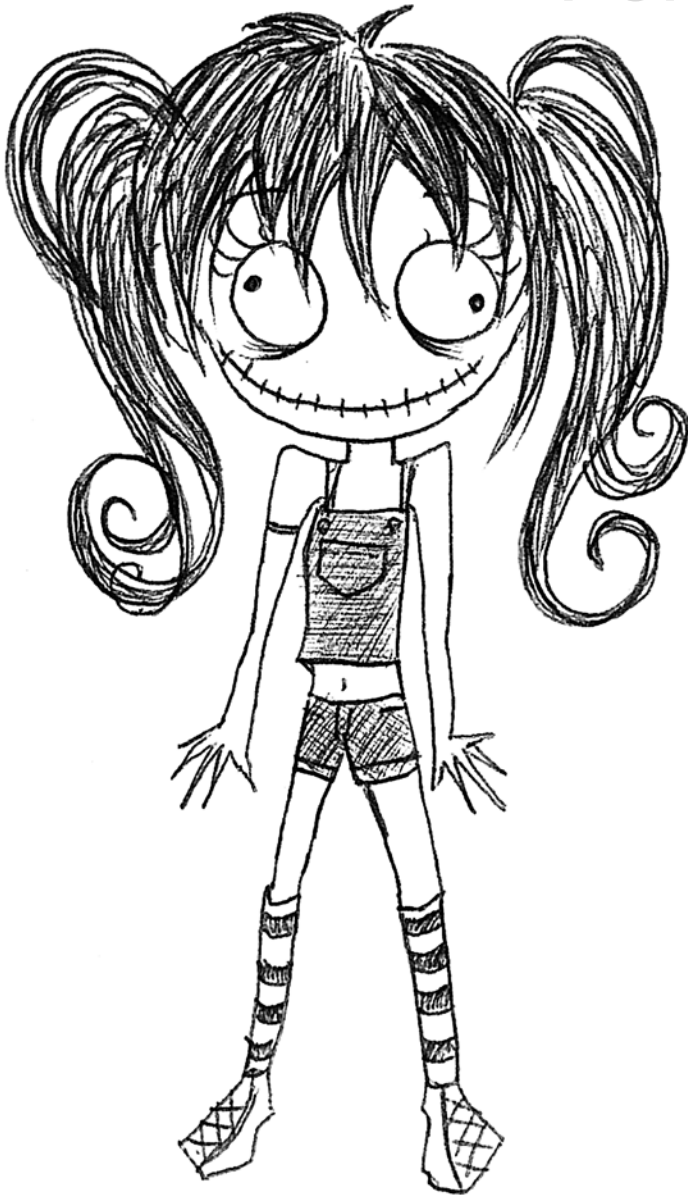


About the Writer

ASOCA

Felix Cheong is the author of 17 books, including five volumes of poetry, a trilogy of satirical flash fiction and three children's picture books. His works have been widely anthologised and nominated for the prestigious Frank O'Connor Award and the Singapore Literature Prize. Conferred the Young Artist Award in 2000 by the National Arts Council, he holds a master's in creative writing and is currently an adjunct lecturer with the National University of Singapore, Murdoch University, University of Newcastle and Curtin University.

ASOCA



About the Illustrator

ASPCA

Cheryl Charli Tan never saw herself as an illustrator and has, until recently, has only done art as a hobby. She is an aspiring circus artist and theatre practitioner passionate about experimental works incorporating film, installation, sound, movement and visual art. She writes for Bandwagon Asia, Popsoken.sg and Plural Art Mag. When she is not geeking out over the latest horror film, superhero, or sci-fi flick, Cheryl buries herself in circus arts, music, film, art, photography, and sociology — amongst other things like astronomy, dinosaurs, literature, comic books and cats.

ASPCA