“Wild Dreams”  
Yangsze Choo’s novels are infused with the tropical mysteries of her childhood.  
by STUART MILLER

For a three-year-old Malaysian girl, the “magic hour” came in the heat of the afternoon, when everyone else in the small white bungalow was resting. She’d stand at the window, watching in wonder. “The world is full of this shimmering heat, a tropical dream,” she recalls. “This old house that is basically falling down and is surrounded by the jungle. There were monkeys and wild chickens and other animals out there.”

The girl held that experience close as her family moved to cities in far-off lands like Japan and Germany for her diplomat father’s work. (Her mother, a Chinese school teacher, couldn’t work while they were abroad.) At each stop she was the new kid, always the foreigner on the outside looking in. She carried the images with her when she crossed the ocean to America, where she graduated from Harvard, worked in the corporate world as a management consultant, then moved to California, where she lives now, and had two children of her own. Along the way, as a stay-at-home-mom, she started translating those childhood memories—not the specifics, but the magic, the wild lushness of a mysterious world—into words, into stories.

Yangsze Choo ’95 became a novelist. Initially, she wrote simply for herself. “For a long time, writing was my secret life,” she says. “I never thought I would get published.” Her first novel was a first-person tale told by an elephant-detective (yes, YANGSZE CHOO

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My Name is Red, and Susanna Clarke’s Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell, “all wonderful stories of new and strange worlds interspersed with the ordinary.” She also reached back to her childhood, reading historic traveler’s tales about Malaysia by Isabella Bird and R.H. Bruce Lockhart. There was also some Somerset Maugham lying around her family’s house, including short stories, set in 1930s colonial Malaya. She was too young to fully grasp them, so “I put some of that feeling into the idea of Ren, the houseboy who is privy to a lot of grown-up secrets that he doesn’t quite comprehend.”

Despite the dark undercurrents (Ji Lin is filled with “an inky, twilight gloom” as events become “cold weights on a string of bad luck”), Choo’s characters are energetic and exuberant, much like their creator. She says those evocative phrases, and even the narrative arcs, just come to her. “Writing is like riding a bicycle at night with no lights. You never know what’s coming up, but when you’re on a roll, it’s wonderful.”

Conversations with Choo tend to veer off into tangents: a question about her writing becomes a discussion of mice and rats, or raising kids, or chocolate, which she says is never far from her mind (or her hands). “You never know what’s coming up, but when you’re on a roll, it’s wonderful.”

Moving around shaped Choo’s writing, too—being uprooted meant always trying to blend in, which taught her to be a keen observer of her peers and what was or wasn’t considered cool. It also taught her to always embrace the new.

Still, her early childhood retains a strong hold on her: tigers, monitor lizards, and other wild creatures are essential to her novel (and many more were cut in editing). Her parents have returned to Kuala Lumpur and she visits each year, often doing research for the details that infuse her work with a deep and detailed sense of place. “Writing or reading a novel is like entering someone else’s vivid dream,” she says. “I had to build up a world with specific details, so readers feel like everything is there and it doesn’t get blurry.”

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