

Books

AUTHOR'S TALE

Jesse Sutanto talks to **Emily Watkins** about being the first writer of colour to win the Comedy Women in Print prize – and the stereotypes she fought with along the way

Jesse Sutanto never thought that her family was particularly unusual. It wasn't until her husband suggested that she draw on his "anything but boring" in-laws for creative inspiration that Sutanto began to look at her relatives from a fresh perspective. The resulting book, *Dial A for Aunties*, has won 2021's Comedy Women in Print prize – though its first iterations sound less than light-hearted. "I was trying to write about [my family] but everything came out too serious," says Sutanto by video call from Jakarta, where she now lives. "The family drama was hitting way too close to home."

Not to be discouraged, she tried a different tack: "What if I lean in to the completely ridiculous, the extreme," she recalls, "and just throw in a dead body?"

Her debut adult novel, *Dial A for Aunties* is about a young woman who kills her blind date – "and then has to get the help of her meddling mother and aunts to get rid of the body while also catering a billionaire's wedding". And, just to be clear, "for the sake of peace, and good relationships with my family, it is completely not at all based on anyone I know".

Dial A for Aunties follows the Chans – photographer Meddelin ("My parents were aiming for Madeleine"), her mother and three aunts – through a genre-bending caper that combines comforting romcom narrative beats with a murder mystery's twists and turns.

At its humorous heart, the book is a love story, involving Meddy's long-lost college boyfriend Nathan, who happens to be running the resort where the wedding is taking place – but as its title (and reader feedback) suggests, it is Meddy's aunts who steal the show.

"I've received so many emails from Chinese-Indonesian readers who are like, how did you get this



CW/PIPA

footage of my family?" Sutanto laughs. "And what's really funny is that I received a lot of DMs from people from other cultures, too – Jamaican readers, Indian readers, Middle Eastern readers."

Meddy and her family switch between Mandarin, Indonesian and English (the author herself grew up between Singapore, Indonesia and Oxford), and a lot of the book's laughs come from nearly-but-not-quite translations (see Ma's accidental sexting with her daughter's doomed suitor, "I have a lot to drink. Quite wet now").

Sutanto deploys the non-native dialogue carefully, though. "I struggled a lot with whether I should have the characters speaking broken English – because that is how my family speaks – or whether I should just represent us in the most positive way possible. Because I'm very aware that not many Chinese-Indonesian books have gone mainstream."

Sutanto is the first ethnic minority writer to win the Comedy Women in Print prize, now in its third year. If the award exists because funny writing by women has been overlooked for too long ("I still remember when the only people considered funny were men"), then funny writing by women of colour has been doubly passed over. "I did receive rejections years ago that were along the lines of: 'Sorry, we just bought a book with a Chinese main character,'" recalls Sutanto. "It

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confirmed my suspicion that there's only ever room for one minority."

Despite having a sequel and a Netflix adaptation in the works, the novel's success is still sinking in. "Just the other day, my husband was telling our five-year-old, 'Mama is certified the funniest female writer in an entire country.' And she was like, 'Wow!'" says Sutanto. "But when I heard it, I said, 'No, he's just exaggerating.' Then my husband was like – 'I'm literally not.'" She laughs again, less straightforwardly. "And then it really hit me. What kind of example am I setting to my daughter, to say, 'Oh, Papa's just exaggerating?'"

"It feels unreal. I keep waiting for them to tell me they've made a mistake and could I return the prize? I'm so honoured, especially as there were all these amazing books on the long list, many of them by women of colour. I'm eternally grateful to women of colour who have paved the way."

No doubt the next wave of writers will say the same of Sutanto herself. Charming, refreshing and delightfully subversive, *Dial A for Aunties* proves that generational learning, like language, is a two-way street. And if it pushes bright young women to discover that they're capable of more than they imagined, all the better.

Dial A for Aunties is published by HarperCollins, at £8.99. Its sequel, *Four Aunties and a Wedding*, is due to be published on 3 March, at £12.99



WHAT I'M READING NOW

THE SANATORIUM

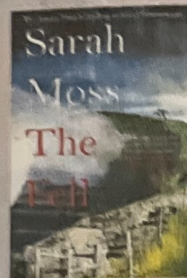
By Sarah Pearce

"My meat and potatoes are adult thrillers – I love them. I'm in the middle of *The Sanatorium*; it's really good."

WHAT I'M READING NEXT

"I'm making my way through the Reese Witherspoon Book Club picks, because I've read a few and they are all so good! She has such a good taste."

WHAT WE'RE READING

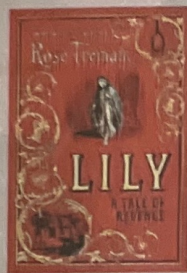


FICTION

THE FELL

By Sarah Moss

(£14.99, Picador) Kate slips out of quarantine for a walk on the moor – then takes a more fateful slip. Unfolding from four perspectives, what follows is a suspense that dwells on the mores of the current era.

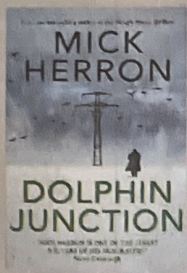


HISTORICAL FICTION

LILY: A TALE OF REVENGE

By Rose Tremain

(£18.99, Chatto & Windus) The bestselling Tremain visits the mid-19th century for a superlative Gothic tale of a rebellious founding with a dark secret.

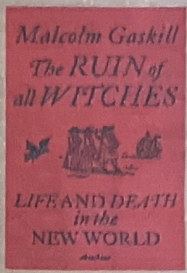


SHORT STORIES

DOLPHIN JUNCTION

By Mick Herron

(£16.99, John Murray) The thriller writer cuts through the tension with his unique brand of barbed humour in this first collection of tales, including some set in the world of his Slough House spy series.

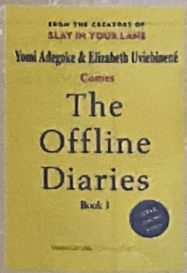


NON-FICTION

THE RUIN OF ALL WITCHES

By Malcolm Gaskill

(£20, Allen Lane) Massachusetts, 1651: food is spoiling, livestock is ailing, people are having strange visions, children are dying. And so the witch hunt began. Utterly absorbing.



CHILDREN'S 9-12

THE OFFLINE DIARIES

By Yomi Adegoke & Elizabeth Uviebinwa

(£12.99, HarperCollins Children's) The *Stay in Your Lane* authors make their children's debut by following two Year 8 girls as they navigate school and tricky home lives.