

# Books

## Fantasy islands

The price of modernity in a love story set in Singapore

By Zahir Janmohamed  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

A great book title is one whose meaning alters as a book unspools. Take Don DeLillo's "White Noise," for instance: The first time the phrase "white noise" appears in the novel, it's used as a sort of glib aside about the nature of death. But as the book progresses — and the consequences of the novel's plague become more apparent — the phrase takes on a darker, more serious hue. The result is that the title deepens and ages not just as the novel progresses, but also with each rereading of the book.

Rachel Heng's new novel, "The Great Reclamation," is undoubtedly a book with a great title. On one level, it's about the actual process of land reclamation, which makes sense, given Singapore's history. (Heng is herself a native of Singapore.) The first known act of land reclamation occurred in 1819 when the British colonial officer Stamford Raffles began transforming the once sleepy fishing village of Singapore into a port that the British hoped would compete with the Dutch. These land reclamation projects continued throughout Singapore's history; today it is estimated that over 20 percent of the country comes from reclaimed land.

On a deeper level, though, the novel is about what it means to reclaim something that once was, even if others

**THE GREAT RECLAMATION**  
By Rachel Heng  
Riverhead,  
464 pages, \$28

insist it was never there in the first place. The novel centers around a young boy, Ah Boon, who is born into a fishing village in the

waning years of British colonial rule in Singapore. Much to his father's dismay, Ah Boon is disinterested in fishing, preferring instead to spend time with his childhood crush, Siok Mei. One day, Ah Boon discovers a magical ability to detect movable islands that no one else can see. These islands have bountiful amounts of fish, which grant Ah Boon's family a financial stability they've never had before. It also gives Ah Boon something he always craved but never found: affection and approval from his father.

Soon after Ah Boon discovers his gifts, Japan invades Singapore. Some celebrate, saying, "Asia for Asians." But this is followed, as Heng writes, by "bayoneting Chinese babies, beheading Indian soldiers, filling Malay guts with water until they splattered and burst." The British then take over again, and Siok Mei and Ah Boon find themselves on opposing sides. Siok Mei follows in her parents' footsteps by becoming an activist. She is arrested by the British; when she is released, she waits for Ah Boon, hoping he will support her, but he doesn't.

They are teenagers now, and Ah Boon, a popular kid at school, relishes in being known as the "diplomat" among his friends, never taking any sides — a powerful shift in how we understand his character. Heng introduces us to him as a sort of Harry Potter type with magical gifts, but the novel asks, what is the use of special powers if they are not used to help others?

Indeed, one of the things that  
**"GREAT RECLAMATION", Page N10**



TONYA ENGEL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

## Secret self

The heroine of Victor LaValle's western gothic wrestles with a horror from her past

BY JOSHUNDA SANDERS  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

In Victor LaValle's latest novel, "Lone Women," Adelaide Henry torches her childhood home in California's Lucerne Valley before dragging the burden that lives inside her steamer trunk to what she hopes will be a new, improved life in Big Sandy, Mont. Readers can be forgiven for thinking, right away, that Adelaide is some kind of psychopath. First, she apparently murders her family. Then she contemplates murdering a wagon driver, Mr. Cole, when he bad-mouths her family, one of a handful of Black farming families known for being odd and keeping to themselves. "A funny thing happens when a man thinks he has a woman's company all to himself," we learn early in the novel. "He may show a face to her that he would keep hidden if there were even one more person around. He speaks from his secret self."

Adelaide herself has secrets enough without adding Mr. Cole's. But "Lone Women" is also set in the Wild West of 1915. As awkward and hostile as people may be around Black and brown women now, their attitude toward a sturdy, tall Black woman like Adelaide in the early 1900s would have been frightening indeed.

**"LONE WOMEN", Page N10**

**LONE WOMEN**  
By Victor LaValle  
One World,  
304 pages,  
\$27

'I read a lot of books and ate a lot of pizza. Now here I am.'



## BIBLIOPHILES

### A love of books inspired by Pizza Hut

BY AMY SUTHERLAND  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

**B**lythe Roberson gives the classic white male genre — the road trip — a comedic, female, millennial spin in her new book "America the Beautiful?: One Woman in a Borrowed Prius on the Road Most Traveled." Roberson is the author of "How to Date Men When You Hate Men," has written for The New Yorker, Esquire, and Vice, as well as the NPR quiz show "Wait Wait ... Don't Tell Me!," and was a researcher for "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert." She lives in Brooklyn.

**BOOKS:** What are you reading?

**ROBERSON:** I'm in the middle of three or four books. I'm reading André Aciman's novel "Call Me by Your Name" for book group. It's very sensual and loose. It takes place over six weeks but it's not always clear on what day things are happening, which I like. We're also reading Dorothy Strachey's "Olivia," which came out in the 1940s and was influential for Aciman. It's a novella about a young girl who falls in love with the headmistress at her boarding school. I'm also reading Hilary Mantel's "Wolf Hall," Shakespeare's play "Coriolanus," and "A Beginner's Guide to Recognizing Trees of the Northeast"

by Mark Mikolas. I'm trying to teach myself how to identify trees.

**BOOKS:** What inspired you to teach yourself to identify trees?

**ROBERSON:** Richard Powers's "The Overstory." I know this is cliché but I found that novel so life-changing. I'm only halfway through my tree book after a year because I read about one and then go and try to find it, which is a bit difficult in New York City. I have a lot of books about nature and foraging because I was dating someone last year who was living upstate. We would get into fights about whether knowl-

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