

Interview: Ten Questions for Bernice Chauly

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Bernice Chauly (Photo by Kenny Loh)

Bernice Chauly is an award-winning Malaysian author whose writings include four poetry collections *going there and coming back* (1997), *The Book of Sins* (2008), *Onkalo* (2013), and *Incantations/Incarcerations* (2019), a short story anthology entitled *Lost in KL* (2008), a memoir *Growing Up with Ghosts* (2011), and a novel *Once We Were There* (2017). She lectures in creative writing at colleges and universities in Kuala Lumpur and was an honorary fellow in writing at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program in 2014. She was former director of the George Town Literary Festival and founder and director of the KL Writers Workshop. For more

than twenty years she has worked as a multi-disciplinary artist and her films and photographs have been exhibited and screened worldwide. She also works with NGOs, particularly with migrant and refugee communities in Malaysia.

For this interview, I spoke to Bernice about her two latest works. Her novel *Once We Were There* constitutes her first foray into novel writing and *Incantations/Incarcerations* is a collection of poems. I talked to her about her ideas and concerns in these two texts and what inspired her to write these books. Bernice has experimented with different literary genres and it was interesting to find out the different challenges she faces when writing in a particular genre.

1. Hi Bernice. Congratulations on your two latest publications, *Once We Were There* and *Incantations/Incarcerations*. I would like to start with *Once We Were There*, your first novel. You are quoted as saying that there is a great void in Malaysian letters about the “Reformasi” movement and that was one of the reasons you wrote the book. Why is it important to document in the form of the novel, this particular moment in Malaysian history? What other gaps in Malaysian literature did you wish to fill with this novel?

The Malaysian Reformasi was a watershed moment in the country’s history and yet there is so little written about it. I knew I would write about it eventually but I wasn’t sure how, and I didn’t have the characters to work with in the beginning. I approached the novel from multiple angles and had written about 20,000 words before I decided to discard it all and start from scratch. I needed to find an anchor to the story, something that worked for me, something that could sustain the timeline I was thinking of, so it took time and thought and dreaming. I am an ardent student of history so my next novel will be set during the 1870s in Perak, during the height of the tin-rush and the beginnings of British intervention in Malaya.

2. The female protagonist Delonix Regia is a complex character, a woman who, it could be said, goes through hell but does come out of her ordeal with some semblance of self and the possibility of finding happiness. Quite a few details about her, I would say, chime with your own life story: losing a parent at a young age, being a journalist, her involvement with NGOs, working with the online newspaper *Saksi*, and so on. Were you inspired by anyone else when creating her character?

Del’s character is very layered and she is an amalgamation of some real people, and a lot of fiction. I wanted to portray a woman who is dealt many blows in life against the backdrop of a turbulent time but I also think that hers is reflective of many women who live everyday realities. The novel is very democratic in that sense, you are

allowed to task your characters with deep and cruel conflicts, and to have them find their way out. I learnt a great deal about character and constructing character in the process of writing her character. I had other plans for her, but when she became real to me, she led the way.

3. You have said that Kuala Lumpur is the most fascinating city on the planet! The evocations of Kuala Lumpur in the 1980s and 1990s are so vivid in *Once We Were There*. What are your impressions of twenty-first century Kuala Lumpur? How does it differ from the city you draw up in your novel? And what aspects of this twenty-first century city do you celebrate and what about it depresses you?

I didn't grow up in KL so when I returned from Canada in the early 1990s, KL was the clear option for work and creative possibilities. As a young artist who wanted to work and learn, I was fortunate to have been thrust into artistic circles which gravitated towards producing work for the stage, journalism, dance, television and film. It was a time of so much possibility and to be a part of that 1980s generation who "returned" to Malaysia, so to see the city grow and expand vertically and otherwise, was especially thrilling. I tried to portray the KL of the 1990s, the time of "Malaysia Boleh", of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), of the Petronas Twin Towers, KLCC, KLIA, and to contrast it with a dark underbelly. KL has pockets of so many different communities; Bukit Bintang is so cosmopolitan and Chow Kit, which flanks it, is vastly different. You have demographics that span the rich and poor, and people from all over the world, with different languages, cultures, all slammed together in this one area, it's fascinating. All are trying to survive, all trying to live from day to day, with dreams, expectations, failures, heartbreak. I also wanted to look at the violence that occurs on an everyday basis, to frame the characters who live within the confines of space and certain margins and show how they try to survive. KL is a city that *forces* you to survive — some do, many don't. I wanted to depict that kind of struggle, and to find the lines that separate people and bring them together. I wrote a travel guidebook to KL many years ago, so I already had a very deep understanding of the city, and so I wanted to unearth specific areas. I have a deep affection for the city today as I did then, because the KL during the Reformasi was a city that became battered and bruised, the city protected us, it gave us shelter, so many places in KL are marked by protest, by the blood, sweat and tears of the people who rose up in defiance, who fought back. I wanted to trace those lines as well. To make it visceral, felt, experienced. It is a celebration of what KL is, and was.

4. The struggles of transgender people to gain and retain their rights has set off an explosive conversation about sex, identity and the human condition. The character Marina, a transgender sex worker from Sabah,

is a dominant presence in your novel. What do you want to say about the trans people community in your novel?

Trans people have rights just like everyone else. It's important to note that gender used to be a lot more fluid in our past, there used to be a lot more acceptance, but today trans people are targeted and harassed and criminalized. I have tremendous respect for the activists fighting for trans rights and I truly support the work that they're doing. I sat with trans activists before the book was published so as to make sure that I did not get certain facts wrong, and they were very supportive of my ideas. They even made suggestions as to how I could make Marina a more colourful character! I am a stickler for facts and accuracy, so I had to make sure that the laws I depicted were accurate for the time. Incidentally, in 1998, I wrote a play called "Three Lives" which was directed by Krishen Jit and it featured three monologues of sex workers, performed by three different actors. It was a precursor to the work and research I further applied to the novel.

5. You approached many publishers, including a Malaysian one, before Singaporean publishing house Epigram took up your manuscript. Because of the controversial themes and the steamy descriptions in *Once We Were There*, the Malaysian edition has "for mature readers only" printed on its cover. How has the Malaysian public reacted to your novel? Is it what you expected? Are you happy with the response?

I think Epigram has done well, all things concerned, especially with getting out the UK edition as well. I sent the manuscript to many publishers and editors in the UK and US and got a stack of rejections, not for the fact that it was too steamy or controversial, but for the reason that many did not understand the politics or the setting, nor did they know how to edit the book accordingly as there were too many unfamiliar variables. Ultimately, it boils down to whether the book can sell in the West. I even had one editor say, "the book is too KL", which I found to be simply bizarre. Would anyone say that a novel was "too London, or too New York?" I think many publishers have a distinct idea of what Southeast Asian literature is like, or should be. I don't want to conform to that notion as I think it's crucial that writers write what is truthful and authentic to *our* voice, to our stories and our experience. I have had varied responses from Malaysian readers to the book – some love it, some don't, some take issue with the drugs and sex, and some with the fact that Anwar [Ibrahim] is seen as heroic – but I really tried to reflect the time, to be as accurate as possible, because KL really was that place to many of us. We were forced to take alliances, we were in the middle of a reckoning, we knew that we would be forever changed. The novel reflects one version of what happened, as I do use historical facts, but as a novelist one must take certain liberties with fiction.

6. You have ventured into different literary genres: poetry, memoir writing, short stories and novels. What would you say are the particular challenges of writing poetry and writing a novel? Do you have a preference for any genre?

I started as a poet because it was a form that I gravitated towards in my teens. The tropes of what was confessional and feminist was something I related to because of the very nature of who and where I was at the time, of what I was discovering as a young woman in Canada, surrounded by a sea of other female voices. I had a marvelous creative writing professor who encouraged me, as she herself was an Asian writer from India and she relished in the fact that I wanted to write from that persona. I was also part of a writers' circle in Winnipeg, I had a group of friends who were English Lit majors and we met twice a month to read our work out to each other and to critique the work. It was run very much like a workshop, and some of us have gone on to become published writers, two of whom are now celebrated in Canada. The novel was too terrifying at first, I never thought I could ever do it. It just seemed to be impossible and daunting and much harder than motherhood, and I didn't have "money or a room of one's own". 17 years ago I became a single mother of two young daughters and that dictated my life in every possible way imaginable. I could not write the novel until my children were old enough to be left for months at a time. The poetry was easier, I could write it in spurts, but the novel is concentrated, brutal, arduous, it's the most difficult thing I have ever done. And now that I have written one novel, the most obvious thing is to write another.

7. *Incantations/Incarcerations* is raw, brittle and passionate in its depictions of women, particularly older women. You seem to linger on the physical aspects of aging. Could you elaborate on this?

Growing old has come as a bit of a shock. Nothing can possibly prepare you for menopause, a foggy brain and creaky joints. Someone once said, "Growing old is not for sissies." Now that I am in my early 50s, the desire to live has outshone the desire to die. If I am to write more, I have to find pathways to live well, and work well. I have more ideas than ever, and I want to plunge myself into a new novel, to immerse myself into something that will take years to research and write. This is a new kind of thrill, far more exciting than living excessively. The physical changes over the past few years are very stark and this has been a process of adjustment. The body is no longer what I was and I have to accept the changes to the physical and mental self, and to find new ways of living. The body is not infallible, it is impermanent, it is only flesh, and it does fall apart. But, I can look after it as best I can, now, and serve it well. It has served me well and I now I have to respect it. The pandemic has taught me many lessons, and the most staggering one is this – if I want to write more, I have to stay alive.

8. In varying ways, both *Once We Were There* and *Incantations/Incarcerations* examine the challenges, trials, sorrows and joys of being a mother. Comment on this please.

I am a single mother, yes, but I am also an artist. It's a double whammy. There is no greater high or low. The mothering never stops, and only single mothers who are artists can fully comprehend this. My daughters were seven and two when I left my marriage, and they are now 24 and 19. I worked multiple jobs; as an actor, a TV director, a writer, a photographer, a filmmaker, a teacher, a festival director. I am currently working on four different contracts, so it's endless, but I am grateful for the work. When I was working on the memoir, I discovered the French feminist theorist and writer Hélène Cixous and her notion of *écriture féminine* and the writing of, and from, the body. I look at women's writing over the centuries and it's obvious that what they wrote was so closely connected to how they lived their lives. Life in the fourteenth century was very confined and restrictive, as it was in the eighteenth century, and only women who were educated and of a certain class, could write. My grandmothers were both illiterate, my mother was educated in university in Melbourne, and wrote beautifully and eloquently. My Chinese grandmother learnt to read and write a little, but my Punjabi grandmother could only write her own name. I grew up loving language and books, and read voraciously. And so, it has been my mission, my task to write with authenticity and honesty, to not write for anyone, not the "male" gaze, nor the Asian gaze, or to adhere to prescribed notions of what I can and should write about. I write about what it means to be a woman, a mother, a single parent, an older woman. One grows to understand the craft better, and so I write with imagination and the force of language. Each book has to evolve, to develop one's ability to write about life in a way where the questions you ask are always probed in different ways, I want my brain to think differently with each book, I want to push myself to write about things that are new and difficult because I do not want to get comfortable with what I think I know. It's alright to start with writing what you know, but then you have to throw yourself into the deep end, you can't be swimming in the shallows all the time. This is where it gets a little terrifying, and I like it, because it's a challenge, it makes me feel like I am capable of writing the impossible.

9. *Incantations/Incarcerations* talks about loss: loss of youth, ability, relationships, roles in life, parents, loved ones, the earth as it once was. In the context of our present time defined by so much loss and uncertainty, tell us how you view the future of humanity. How do you see us growing out of this quagmire?

I think we are all grieving in some way as things are unraveling in a way none of us could ever think possible, but it is happening, here, now, in our lifetime; the planet on the verge of destruction, the world in a pandemic, the politicians useless and ineffective, the news disconsolate and depressing. Artists have always tried to make sense of the world, of our place in it, and this will not stop. Making art is more urgent than ever and writers need to

write more, find stories and tell them, create visions of multiple realities, tell stories that matter, tell them in new and fresh ways, use language differently, work harder to understand conflicts, histories, new perspectives. This is not the time to wallow or be inhibited, we have to work really hard to make work, in the time that we have. As a writer, I have to keep writing, and work enough so I can afford the space and time to write. As an educator, I have to facilitate learning, to allow my students to learn the craft of writing, to allow them to write their truths, to learn the basic rules of poetry, of prose, to allow them to learn and write effectively, to encourage them, to praise them when it is due. I need to continue to be a mother to my daughters, to do my best. We need to be better friends, better human beings. We need to be better and kinder to each other.

10. What are your plans for the future?

I am working on one novel and have another in mind. The poems will always be there, the key is to allow the writing to evolve. The fifth collection will again, be a reflection of these new stages in my life, and the form will hopefully reflect that. The current novel demands a lot of research so the National Archives has been a second home since June. Poring over old books and manuscripts, and imagining Perak in the nineteenth century is infinitely preferable to spending time in this present. The plan is to spend most of next year writing a first draft, this may take at least six uninterrupted months, so I need to prepare myself mentally, emotionally for this task. It will be in unfamiliar territory, in a vastly different landscape, and I will be wading through another time in our history. I want to be able to keep writing, one book at a time, and hopefully be close to nature, to trees, to a lake. Walk, swim, write. Repeat. I find the need to be closer to nature more than ever, and I want to try and fulfill this for the next book.

Thank you very much for this interview, Bernice.