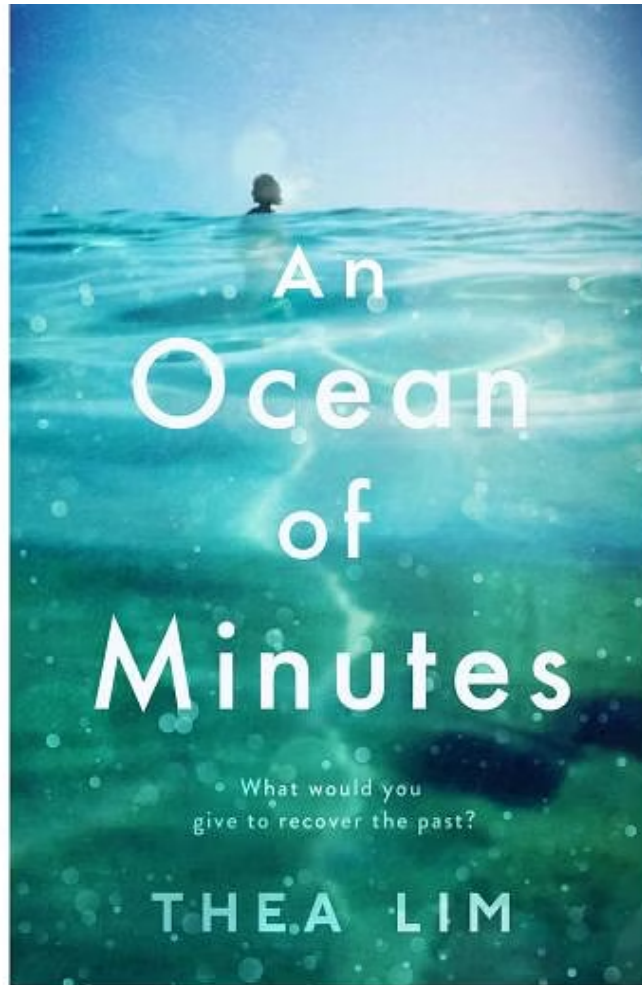


THE STRAITS TIMES

Review

Delving into immigration and the ravages of time



AN OCEAN OF MINUTES



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FICTION

AN OCEAN OF MINUTES

By Thea Lim

Quercus/ Paperback/ 357 pages/ \$29.95/ Major bookstores from Thursday

4 stars

In 1981, a viral pandemic spreads across the world. Civilisation collapses as populations succumb. In the United States, a corporation called TimeRaiser offers a way out: sending healthy people forward in time into an infection-free future, where they are needed to Make America Great Again.

It is a one-way ticket. But Polly Nader, 23, trapped in the coastal city of Galveston, Texas, knows she must take it. Her boyfriend Frank is sick and this is the only way she can get him on the list for a vaccine.

They arrange to meet when she arrives 12 years in the future. But she is re-routed mid-flight and plunged on arrival into a bewildering new world where she is an indentured labourer and Frank is nowhere to be found.

Lim's remarkable debut delves into immigration and the ravages of time, yet without ever losing sight of the love story at its bittersweet heart.

Her dystopia is not a dramatic one - neither Orwellian police state nor Atwoodian repression - but rather a bureaucratic snarl of such mundane, grinding iniquities that it is frighteningly plausible - because somewhere in the real world, it is happening to someone else.

When the disease mutated in the southern part of the US, the nation split in half. Now they are separate countries with a border wall keeping impoverished America out of the haven of the United States.

Stuck in Galveston, which is trying to transform itself into a destination for health tourism, Polly has to work to pay off her bond. This continues to accumulate as she racks up costs, from a toothbrush to the prohibitively expensive administrative fee to place a search for Frank.

Though she is sent to the future as a skilled worker, an upholsterer of vintage furniture, a series of missteps gets her downgraded. She ends up with the lower-skilled workers doing the jobs nobody wants, living in dire conditions at a dormitory and forced to pay for her own tools.

Lim is aware of the difficulty most people have in responding emotionally to "the behemoth movements of global powers". It is only in narrow slices, where politics intersects with the needs of one's own small life, that one can make sense of them and she mines these skilfully.

Grief in her writing is often made so tangible that one feels it physically, a heaviness in the body. Loss, fed through time, takes up space. "In her heart," she writes of Polly, trying to reconcile herself with her lost years, "the past was not another time, but another place that still existed".

Despite the grand scope of issues she takes on in the novel, she has also created that rare thing in modern fiction - a truly compelling love story, between two people you cannot help but be emotionally invested in.

It is for love that people travel great distances from their homes, place their lives in danger and make unimaginable sacrifices. It is love that would push them through time if such a thing were possible. The tragedy of it is that more often than not, love will not meet them on the other side. But that has never stopped anyone from going.

If you liked this, read: *The Time Traveller's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger (Vintage, 2003, \$17.07, Books Kinokuniya). Henry has a rare genetic disorder that causes him to travel through time unpredictably and against his will. Many of his trips converge around the timeline of Clare, whom he first meets as a little girl and later marries as an adult.

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