

JEE LEONG KOH *Steep Tea*



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Steep Tea is Singapore-born Jee Leong Koh's fifth collection and the first to be published in the UK. Koh's poems share many of the harsh and enriching circumstances of a postcolonial queer writer. They speak in a voice both colloquial and musical, aware of the infusion of various traditions and histories. Taking leaves from other poet--Elizabeth Bishop, Eavan Boland and Lee Tzu Pheng, amongst others--Koh's writing is forged in the known pleasures of reading, its cultures and communities.

"Jee Leong Koh is a poet whose breadth of ambition is matched by an acute sensitivity to detail. In *Steep Tea*, he responds to his readings of women poets from Eastern and Western traditions with his own very personal poems, a sheaf of work in various forms, which convince one that reading is not just a hobby or even an education, but an essential component of human alertness." -Gregory Woods

"Here are short, deft narratives that map the mismatched patterns of male and female desire grounded in partial understandings of love. The author's native Singapore sounds out sharply, often ironically, in counterpoint to the intimate domestic interiors that help to constitute what will surely be recognised as some of contemporary poetry's classic love poems." -David Kinloch

Steep Tea Details

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From Reader Review Steep Tea for online ebook

Jason says

Steep Tea is now my favorite of Jee Leong Koh's books. I've been reading him since the old days at Sarah Lawrence and have always been amazed at his precision and control. Like the snake in "Eve's Fault," which opens the collection, Koh is a quiet fellow. His poems are quiet, they almost sneak up on you. Read them carefully, over and over. Look in side the lines, the word play, and you will find wonder. These poems speak of myth and memory, of childhood and desire. These poems inhabit a world where everything is and isn't what it appears. The everyday moments, like in "Broccoli" that make the reader pause and hopefully, realize that despite their own hardships, their disappointments, this is their life. It can be beautiful if we let it. And thinking of the lines from Litany "Let our love be as our travel and our work, earning a common currency here on earth."

Grady says

'In the interval between sex and poetry lies death'

Born in Singapore to Chinese parents Jee Leong Koh was educated in that former British Colony, still divided into four sectors – British/European, Chinese, Malaysian, and Indian - absorbing the experience of transplantation from his familial background of China with the flavors of Singapore's multicultural aroma. Early recognized as an exceptional student he traveled to England to read English at Oxford, teaching English in secondary schools before transferring residence to New York to study Creative Writing at Sarah Lawrence College. He currently teaches English in an independent school in New York City while he pursues his life as an award-winning poet.

But enough of the map of this poet's migration and the changes and adjustments that that manner of maturing has had on his life. Koh writes poems that admix his ethnic matrix with his bilingual facility and adds the element of his sexuality to make some of the more intriguing, brave, at times acerbic, at times needy poems that express not only his own reaction to the cycle of life and love, but also guidelines and seductive comments about traversing the maze of contemporary relationships, especially those of same sex origin.

The Rooms I Move In

I have moved in the rooms of women poets
and, seeing African violets, checked if
they needed water,

careful not to disturb the stolen time in the
chair,
the swivel leather seat, the high cane back.

The desk, if there was one, was bright with
circumstance
cast by an Anglepoise lamp, crooked,

articulate.

The window might look out on an old
monastery
but the door kept its ear open to the crib.

Such rooms I move in when I move
between the men
crowded with desire they disperse in a
stranger's hand.

Before their face I offer the flower of my
mouth,
red in the red light but also out of the red
light,

a wild hibiscus impossible to label chaste
if my red mouth is not so chastened by my
need.

Jay Leong Koh is an important poet worthy of wide attention.

Dennis Bensie says

Solid, personal work from a driven poet. There is a lot to love in this collection.

David says

Beautiful. My favourite poem is "Recognition", but as a Singaporean I might be biased. Thoroughly deserves the Financial Times accolade. Looking forward to more already.

Rui says

I've been a fan of Koh's work ever since his poems first appeared in the Quarterly Literary Review Singapore, way back in 2003. I was struck then by the intelligence and (what sounded like -- who knows, right? :)) honesty, the discipline of the verse -- and these qualities remain (the discipline, if anything, is stronger than ever before, but in a way that liberates the writing and helps it sing). What's new in this collection is an earnest irony in some of the poems -- an apparent paradox, but what better home for paradox

than in poetry. i really liked this book, and will be reading it again.

Brad V says

Carefully sculpted; like tracing the spirals of shells and finding a different, intriguing form of life glowing inside each one.
