

Wonder women

Forget damsels in distress. Xu Xi believes in creating strong women who deal with challenging issues

By Akshita Nanda

Hong Kong-born Xu Xi is a women's writer but not for the faint-hearted female reader.

Her novels are unrepentantly realistic about romance, scorning hearts and flowers. In them, tough women deal with issues such as divorce, single parenthood and a shrinking dating pool as they grow older.

There are no happy endings, only honest ones.

In books such as the recently published *Habit Of A Foreign Sky*, shortlisted in 2007 for the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize for unpublished manuscripts, the main character does not fade into the future with Mr Right, but juggles two men who carry their share of unattractive baggage.

'I have been accused of being unromantic,' Xu, 56, says with a laugh, speaking to LifeStyle at a recent literary gathering at the Singapore Management University.

She adds: 'Romance is so much a part of a woman's life but it's social conditioning, tied in to the fantasy of the bridal dress, white knights and all that.'

'There are no white knights in love among equals. In false romance, however, women are often cast as victims who need to be 'rescued'. Surely, women didn't get the vote, education and equal pay for equal work to be forever diminished as the weaker sex?'

Habit Of A Foreign Sky is her ninth and latest book, and has been lauded in Hong Kong's South China Morning Post and tipped as an indie sleeper hit by Publisher's Weekly.

In it, a globe-trotting career woman, Gail Szeto, navigates romantic entanglements with common sense and a touch of coldness. When it hit the stores in November last year, it had already taken three years to journey to shelves, in part because Xu's publisher Haven Books had to beg her to give the female protagonist softer edges.

Xu herself has a no-nonsense approach to relationships as well. Her jazz musician ex-husband of 10 years and her current partner of 13 years would whip out roses on anniversaries. She is more likely to forget such occasions.

The writer-in-residence at City University of Hong Kong, who also teaches at Vermont College Of Fine Arts in the United States, is best known for two collections of essays on Hong Kong and the Chinese diaspora - *Evanescient Isles* (2008) and *Overleaf Hong Kong* (2004).

Then, there is the 'melodramatic' *Hong Kong Rose* (1997), a story of love and arms smuggling. 'It continues to sell but I don't think it's that great a book,' she says with a smile.

Born Xu Suxi, the eldest of four children of 'two displaced Javanese-Chinese' who met in Hong Kong, she was an early feminist, thanks to her mother, who balanced caring for the family with a pharmacist job, and a father who placed great importance on education.

She inherited the latter's business sense as well, beginning her writing career at age 11 for purely mercenary motives. On learning that the South China Morning Post paid for articles printed in its children's column, she sent in several essays.

'I made about HK\$30 and spent it on comics and sweets,' she recalls.

After reading literature at New York State University, she took a series of marketing and copywriting jobs at companies such as Cathay Pacific and FedEx.

Work took her to various cities in the US and Asia, including a two-year period in Singapore in the mid-1990s, where she developed a love of spicy food.

Inspired by the success of Hong Kong writer Maxine Hong Kingston, she wrote in her free time and published her first novel in 1994. Titled Chinese Walls, it featured twisted relationships among members of an Indonesian-Chinese family in Hong Kong.

Her family was horrified that people might think the story was based on real life. 'My mother was furious. She called and told me, 'All the women at church want to know if there is a problem at home.'"

She continued to scandalise them with her insistence on writing about taboo topics such as sex. Eventually, they became inured. 'Or times changed,' says Xu. 'I think young women are much more confident now. Good, my being a feminist was worth something.'

In 1998, she gave up a six-figure salary as director of special projects at the Asian Wall Street Journal to write full-time, winning several writing residencies at various colleges in Europe and the US.

Though she had become a US citizen a decade earlier, her writings continued to be inspired by Hong Kong, and tensions between race and identity in the city.

Habit Of A Foreign Sky is a departure from this style. Its focus on women's issues was inspired by the trials of four women the author knows well.

The catalyst was meeting three women in the same year, whose experiences indicated a disturbing social trend. 'All had been married and had a child. Their husbands left them for younger women so they were responsible for the child,' says Xu.

The writer has no children but her friends' struggles to balance executive careers and handle single motherhood moved her to write the story of someone who has survived the same predicament.

She also based high-flying Gail on her 91-year-old mother, whom she feels squandered her potential on 'traditional women's responsibilities' such as child-rearing and caring for the family.

'She wanted to be a doctor and couldn't, so she became a pharmacist,' says the author heatedly.

'I always wondered, what if she had lived in another time and place, and had the benefit of feminism. Would she have been happier? I think so.'

akshitan@sph.com.sg

Habit Of A Foreign Sky (\$23.54) is available at Books Kinokuniya.