



Illustration: Brian Wang

Collection gives vivid voice to array of (mostly) female characters

Access
by Xu Xi
Signal 8 Press
★★★★★
Samantha Leese

Access is a collection of 13 short stories in English by Xu Xi, a Hong Kong-born writer and one of the city's most successful literary talents. Her last novel, *Habit of a Foreign Sky* (2010), was a work she described as her "woman's book", and in many ways the stories in *Access* follow on from that theme.

They are populated with strong, mostly Chinese or Eurasian women who represent an intelligent variety of personalities, ages and cultural backgrounds. The overarching theme of the book is desire. Xu Xi deals with emotional and sexual narratives unflinchingly, which gives her work a candour, clarity and relevance that is rarely (although increasingly) seen in writing by women from this part of the world.

Her second story, *Iron Light*, for example, follows 54-year-old Ida Ching to Stockholm with her lover. When he leaves her on a day trip out of town, she finds herself fixating on a past romance: "It would not do, this simply would not do, wandering around a strange city wanting to f***. Not her. A smart, independent, successful professional, the world in her hands, no longer angry, not really."

Of the 13 stories, some are large and searching while others are no more than vignettes surrounding a small and immediately significant moment. They are grouped into "tales", which lends the impression that each story has a moral, like Aesop's fables. And indeed many do. But others don't, because the author has taken a verbal photograph rather than run the full reel, and we must discover meaning for ourselves.

It must be said, however - and on the basis of *Access* and *Habit of a Foreign Sky* alone - that Xu Xi seems more comfortable in the longer form.

One story that departs from the feminine perspective is *Servitude*. It is one of the simplest and sweetest, and certainly relatable to anyone who has grown up with the hierarchy of Hong Kong society.

The main character is Chung, a long-time assistant to the patriarch of Suen Enterprises. Henry, the old man, is suffering from Alzheimer's. This is the kind of writing that shows more than it tells and Chung's personality - indeed his whole situation - is summed up by his afternoon routine: "He removed his suit - one of five, one for each work day - from the wardrobe, changed into a clean shirt, and, after tying his shoelaces, selected a tie from the rack and deftly knotted it. 'Windsor,' he said to his late wife, repeating the lesson learned from his employer on how to tie the sophisticated knot of a suited gentleman. A last check in the mirror to hold the remaining white hairs in place with a little Vaseline and he was ready."

Later, it takes little more than the clink of a key in Chung's pocket to evoke years of loyalty, thwarted.

Xu Xi's last story, *Lady Day*, is by far the most demanding and strangely uplifting. There is a whiff of Tarantino about it and something of the underside of Dickens, but the character's difficult and cosmopolitan history could have only been imagined by an author at ease with the "multi-culti" world of our city.

The heroine is a onetime New York escort who was born a hermaphrodite in Hong Kong. Raised between genders, she was sent to boarding school in England by an unforgiving father, where she was tormented until she escaped. As we enter

the piece, she has been forced to lie low in Amsterdam after telling her story to a young journalist, who used it to expose some of her Wall Street clients.

It is a big story for its 20 pages, a surreal revenge drama laced with issues of identity and sexual politics, trust, freedom, innocence and power. The pace of it feels like a trapped person walking, then trotting and running as they see their way out.

Another tale that stands out is *Famine* which deals with a different kind of desire, substituting gluttony for lust. It is a thin distinction, but important nonetheless - food being the lynchpin of Chinese family life. The narrative follows an unmarried English teacher from her dead parents' home in Hong Kong to New York's famous Plaza Hotel where, in a series of exponentially bizarre scenes, she attempts to drown the privations of her past half-century in unfamiliar luxury. "This room, this endless meal can save me," says the character. "I am vanquishing my fear of death and opulence."



Xu Xi deals with emotional and sexual narratives unflinchingly

The following passage is a sharp observation that grounds the story's dreamscape in a tough reality. Have we, out here in new China, forgotten what it means to starve? And are we the less humble, the more heartless for it?

"There was a time we did not care about opulence and dared to speak of death. You spoke of famine because everyone knew the stories from China were true ... because they saw the hunger around them, among the beggars in our streets, and for some, even in their own homes. There was a time it was better not to have space, or things to put in that space, and to dream instead, because no one had much, except royalty and movie stars, and they were meant to be fantasy ... But you can't speak of famine anymore."

Xu Xi's prose is effective without being overly artistic and her storytelling is original and assured. The range and depth of women's voices are what make *Access* special. Her characters resist the anodyne clichés too often associated with Chinese women. Instead, they show that strength comes in many guises.

game

concocting the conspiracy theory to end all conspiracy theories, only to find that people not only start to believe it, but are also willing to kill for it.

Eco is partly responsible for the recent fashion for mysteries featuring arcane knowledge and ritual slaughter: twinkly postmodernist that he is, he likes to claim that Dan Brown is a character he invented.

The Prague Cemetery, which has already sold a million copies in Europe and South America, is billed as a return to form after three rather disappointing novels. It takes place in familiar territory: Eco likes the story of *The Protocols* so much he has told it at least three times before, in *Foucault's Pendulum*, and two of his essays. Once again, he includes a great deal of eclectic learning, organised around a potboiler plot: in this case, the presiding spirit is the feuilleton serials of Alexandre Dumas and Eugene Sue.

At the beginning of the novel, set in Paris in 1897, a troubled Simonini is writing a memoir on the advice of a certain Austrian Jew he has met. He has blanks in his memory; he wears a fake moustache and beard, for reasons that are not altogether clear to him; he has found a secret passage at the back of his house, leading to an apartment occupied

by a certain Abbe Dalla Piccola, who is never in the same place as he is.

Might this mysterious abbe possibly be the same person as Simonini? Could the protagonist be suffering from a bad case of dissociative personality disorder?

In outline, Simonini's story sounds fun: he cheats, betrays and murders his way through the Risorgimento, the Franco-Prussian war, the Paris Commune and the Dreyfus affair, playing an inglorious behind-the-scenes role in various crucial events, rather like George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman*.

Almost all the characters are real-life figures, and the historical background is fascinating. On his travels, Simonini meets a rogues' gallery of crooks and fanatics who contributed to *The Protocols*. He conspires with secret policemen and Jesuits against the Masons, and then with the Masons against the Jesuits; he mixes with satanists and takes part in an exceptionally lurid black mass.

In practice, though, *The Prague Cemetery* is a tiring plod. Eco is much indebted to Jorge Luis Borges, and this is the sort of exercise - a fictional version of a true story of a fake which had a powerful effect on the real world - that the Argentinian writer would have turned into a

dizzying, flawlessly executed five-page short story. But over Eco's flaccid 400-plus pages, it is frustrating and unsatisfactory.

What John Updike called Eco's "orgy of citation and paraphrase" often becomes unbearable. His desire to cover pages with occult lore is unabated. It is hard, at times, to remember which blandly threatening puppetmaster or sinister Jesuit we are dealing with.

The novel also leaves a slightly unpleasant taste in the mouth. Eco is basically a playful writer: even his best novels are little more than brilliant mechanical toys. Here, the mood of historical pastiche and learned joke comes up uncomfortably against the history of European anti-Semitism.

The many excerpts of hate literature and the reprinted anti-Semitic caricatures exert a grim fascination, but they leave the reader feeling queasy.

The story of *The Protocols* is, in the end, a sombre one, and Eco's treatment of it feels tactlessly crude and silly: towards the end, the repeated, portentous use of the phrase "the final solution" seems entirely unearned.

There are many subjects, after all, which remain well beyond the reach of cheap fiction.

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