



# Shirley Geok-lin Lim

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*For years I continued to believe that there was a kind of woman I wanted to be like. But not my absent mother or silent stepmother, not the punitive nuns or my friends' sad mothers, nor the rubber woman my brothers laughed hysterically at, not jealous Mandy or acquiescent Kim. The problem that confused me for years, until the years formed their own ironic answer, was what to do with my life as a woman: not simply what kind of work I wanted, but how to grow up as a woman.*

— Among the White Moon Faces

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1944
- \* Grew up in Malaysia, currently lives and works in the United States
- \* Identifies herself as a poet, but her work transcends genre

## Biography

Shirley Geok-lin Lim is an award-winning writer of fiction, poetry, and criticism who strives to bring together, rather than separate, the multiplicities in the different threads of her cultural identity. Born in 1944 in Malacca, Malaysia, a small town on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, she endured a childhood powerfully shaped by deprivation, poverty, parental violence and abandonment. Abandoned by her mother, and growing up with five brothers in a culture that rarely recognized girls as individuals, she tried desperately to fit in. Lim described herself during this period as “a wild girl who ran with the boys and alone through the streets” (*Among the White Moon Faces*, 49).

This page was researched and submitted by: Cathy Gallagher, Paula Hoover, Sarah Monahan, Gwen Steel, and Nina Sutton.



# Shirley Geok-lin Lim

## Biography continued

This experience only seemed to toughen Lim. She possessed a “stubborn spirit” that she utilized in school, making her a leader as well as an outcast. In an interview with Sook C. Kong of the Asian Lesbian Bi-sexual Alliance, Lim says, “Growing up when I did, there weren’t many other recreational alternatives, and I had a pretty unhappy childhood. Reading was a huge solace, retreat, escape. I was a really obsessive reader. Somewhere along the line, I had a sense I should write about things I knew rather than read about things I didn’t know. I wanted to write my own voice, my own community.”

Finding her own voice meant coming to an understanding of her native Chinese-Malaysian familial culture vis-a-vis the conflicting values her Westernized parents modeled. She was scorned by teachers for her love of English over her “native” tongue and was looked down upon for wishing to pursue her love of English literature. Her early education was at a Catholic convent school under the British colonial education system. Lim then won a federal scholarship to the University of Malaya which she attended from 1964 to 1969, earning a BA with First Class Honors in English. In 1969, at the age of twenty-four, motivated by two prestigious fellowships, she entered graduate school at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, earning her Ph.D. in English and American Literature in 1973.

Poetry is Lim’s driving passion. In terms of poetry, she says “That was my first form of literary expression and is the most primal for me.” Her first poem was written and then published in the Malacca Times when she was ten. By the time she was eleven, she knew she wanted to be a poet. Her first book of poetry, *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems*, won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1980, just after the birth of Lim’s first (and only) child, Gershom. Lim was the first woman and the first Asian to receive the award. With a provocative and intimate tone, Lim uses her poetry to reach into the past to make sense of the present. Thematically, questions of identity and transition, gender, race, and the complexities of relationships permeate Lim’s poetry. Dreams and her childhood experiences often provide inspiration and source material.



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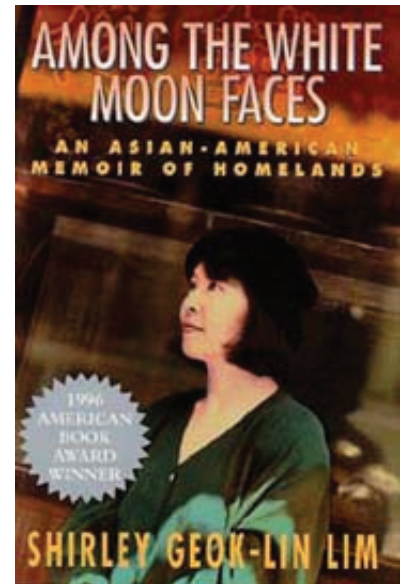
## Biography continued

Although Lim identifies herself as a poet, she is a cross-genre writer who has also published numerous scholarly essays, short stories, and her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (Feminist Press, 1996). In 1990, along with co-editors Mayumi Tsutakawa and Margarita Donnelly, she won the American Book Award for *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology*. In 1982 she won an Asiaweek Short Story award for "Mr. Tang's Uncles" (Feminist Press, 1997).

Lim's writing has received considerable attention both in the United States and in Asia since the 1996 publication of her memoir. Readily apparent in Lim's prose writing are her roots as a poet. There is extreme attention to detail, making the memoir read much like a novel. She describes scenes from her past with vivid imagery. On page 10, for example, she describes "Cold water from a giant tap running down an open drain that is greenish slime under my naked feet."

Lim says that one of the "major thematics" to emerge from the memoir is the story of emigration from Asia to the U.S. As an Asian, she came to see the reality of the U.S. that had been glamorized before she came. In Malaysia she was an outsider for being an "Anglophile freak;" in the U.S. she was lonely in a society where she was treated with awkward stiffness and tentativeness. "There are many ways," she laments, "in which America tells you you don't belong" (*Among the White Moon Faces*, 199).

A simple, yet important element in Lim's writing is her profound honesty. She fearlessly recognizes the struggles she has endured, admitting her choices were not always easy or correct. Her work possesses a rare openness that makes her an accessible voice and courageous role model to all female readers, not just those of a similar heritage.





# Shirley Geok-lin Lim

## Biography continued

“Across the divisions of race and class (between women), a rare yet common ground is visible. We understand each other in devious ways: our physical desires and the shame we have been trained to feel over our bodies, our masked ambitions, the distances between our communities and our hungry selves, our need to be needed. (I find) a sensibility of support that grows when social gender is recognized as a shared experience” (*Among the White Moon Faces*, 157).

Currently working on a novel and new collection of poems, Lim continues to explore origin and identity. Her current research includes a book-length study of gender and nation identities in Asian American discourses.

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

#### Novels

*Joss and Gold* (2001).

#### Poetry

*What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (1998).

*Monsoon History: Selected Poems* (1994).

*Modern Secrets* (1989).

*No Man's Grove* (1985).

*Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems* (1980).

#### Collections of Short Stories

*Two Dreams: New and Selected Stories* (1997).

*Life's Mysteries: The Best of Shirley Geok-lin Lim* (1985).

*Another Country and Other Stories* (1982).

#### Memoir

*Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (1996).



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## Selected Bibliography continued

### Works by the author continued

#### Other Publications

*Tilting the Continent: Southeast Asian American Writing* [by S. Lim, et al. Scheduled to be published in June 2000].

*Power, Race, and Gender in Academe: Strangers in the Tower?* by S. Lim, et al., edited by S. Lim (2000).

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Wang, Jennie. "Interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim" in *Speaking of the Short Story: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*, eds. Farhat Iftekharruddin, Mary Rohrberger, and Maurice Lee (University Press of Mississippi, 1997).

Yong, Aaron Lee Soon. "Trip Has Been Worth It" (*The Straits Times*, 1999).