



# As the Earth Turns Silver

*Alison Wong*

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## **As the Earth Turns Silver** Alison Wong

This title is winner of the Janet Frame Fiction Award 2009. It is the early 1900s and brothers Yung and Shun, immigrants from China, eke out a living as greengrocers in Wellington. The pair must support their families back home, but know they must adapt if they are to survive and prosper in their adopted home. Meanwhile, Katherine McKechnie struggles to raise her rebellious son and her daughter following the death of her husband, Donald. A strident right-wing newspaperman, Donald terrorized his family, though was idolized by his son. One day, Katherine comes to Yung's shop and is touched by the Chinaman's unexpected generosity. Over time a clandestine relationship develops between the immigrant and the widow, a relationship Katherine's son Robbie cannot abide ...During the First World War, as young men are swept up on a tide of macho patriotism, Robbie takes his family's honour into his own hands. In doing so, he places his mother at the heart of a tragedy that will affect everyone and everything she holds dear. Powerful, moving and utterly unforgettable, "As the Earth Turns Silver" announces the arrival of a bold new voice in contemporary fiction.

## **As the Earth Turns Silver Details**

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Author : Alison Wong

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# From Reader Review As the Earth Turns Silver for online ebook

## Sweetp-1 says

I read this as part of a read-along in the Book Loving Kiwis group. It is perhaps not something I would have picked out for myself, but a novel that I very much enjoyed.

The author's ancestors were early Chinese settlers in New Zealand, and while the book is a work of fiction, she has obviously done quite a bit of research about the time period (1905-1920) in order to recapture the atmosphere of a pre-WW1 Wellington. Very evocative of the time period - from the descriptions of the clothing, the lives of the Chinese immigrants, to the role of the women within family life.

This is not a plot driven book - the heart of the story is a tragic and illicit love affair between a widowed woman and her Chinese greengrocer - but very little else happens. The book explores themes of racism, oppression and gender through very short chapters and multiple viewpoints. I particularly enjoyed the chapters from the Chinese characters - they read almost like poetry - and while I marvelled at the differences in the way both cultures lived, it was also easy to draw comparisons between the way the Chinese women were treated (and discarded) and the oppression of Katherine by her thoroughly unlikeable husband.

A touching and poignant novel, and a fascinating insight into Chinese immigration during the early 1900s.

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## Megan says

This story explores issues of prejudice and freedom to live according to your own choices. Both of the main characters are trapped, Yung because the New Zealand society he lives in places him so far at the bottom that most people will not deign to look him in the eye, let alone have a conversation. Katherine because while her husband was alive she lived in his circle of control and after he dies she discovers the difficulties of coping and bringing up two children in a man's world. Both these characters are willing to open their eyes and reach across social boundaries but this takes them further than either expects.

Although I enjoyed this book and it was a quick, simple read I wanted more. I never felt that I truly got inside Yung's character, he felt a little one dimensional. Katherine built up well in the beginning and I really felt for her little day to day struggles and triumphs. But she too fell flat in the end.

The author was too ambitious with her characters and although the three Chinese woman characters were interesting, they were really superfluous to the story. Possibly the same with Katherine's two children. Perhaps if the focus was more centralised on the two main characters they would have come through with more strength.

A disappointing New Zealand Post Book Awards winner that makes me question where the quality of NZ writing has gone...

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## Grace Harris says

Really lovely story

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### **Sara W says**

NZ author Alison Wong tells a tale of Wellington in the early 1900s, where xenophobia of the Chinese meant that a European woman who had a baby to a Chinese man could be put in a mental hospital. The book is gloriously researched, setting the taste and smell and feel of Tory St and Haning St and Courtney Place with the trams and horse-carts and grocer shops and opium dens. Even better when you live in the 'Chinese triangle' as I do, and its an area of the city that is still crowded with Chinese restaurants and apartment dwellers. Once you have read the book you can take a walk to Haning St, where there are some great historical info bill-boards, with pictures of the street as it was in the era of the novel.

Be aware its not a happy read, and it did not leave me proud of early European NZers, but it does mix history with fiction and a host of interesting real life characters come to life. Well well worth it for the history of the era, and the clarity of the writing, which takes you back so clearly. Loved it.

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### **Glennis says**

Worth recommending and reading.

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### **Shumita says**

This was a heart-wrenchingly beautiful novel to read. The entire I felt anguish for what I figured could never be a happy-ending story but the language used to paint her story roped me in so entirely and made me feel personally involved in the characters' lives that I could not set the book down despite me knowing that it would all end tragically anyway. Well worth the read.

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### **S'hi says**

I recently met a woman from a country town in Australia who boldly claimed that city men are too effeminate. Her veterinarian husband sat beside her, gently speaking with numerous other people, between her sudden outbursts of vitriol aimed at no one in particular that yet seemed so pointed. She is the type of person who would be offended and deeply challenged by this book.

Alison Wong gently introduces the tensions of a typical pre-war New Zealand family and gradually works the threads loose. The issues of the day appear one by one between the characters and gradually under their own skin. None of them can escape the pervasive violence that plagues, in particular, the men.

Grounded in factual material, *As The Earth Turns Silver* suggests something more shimmering than the shades of grey that blur our choices. None of us lives alone in our consequences. We unleash them upon each other no matter how careful we consider ourselves to be. Facing them is the challenge of each new day.

A range of male attitudes are fully displayed here, beautifully aligned with a range of female ones as well.

There are no stereotypical characters, as each is given their own space to reflect themselves through the story that holds them together across space and time. The context may seem to set the characters in relief, but really it is the multiplicity of human choices that create context, each to the other.

A beautifully written introduction to cross-cultural understanding, that would be well worth sharing in a reading group or classroom.

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### **Monique Engelen says**

What a little glimpse of Wellington at the turn of the century. Interesting to look at the treatment of the Chinese and of women. At some points I felt it fast forwarded a bit when we could have relished some key parts. Really enjoyed it, and was quite surprised.

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### **Amanda Wells says**

I'm not sure exactly what it was about this book that I loved, but I was utterly compelled.

I'm not sure what else to say about it except that if you love well developed characters set in historical settings, you'll likely love this too.

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### **Debbie says**

This novel is set in my hometown of Wellington, New Zealand, and spans the years 1905-1922. Two very different families find their lives intertwined with tragic results.

Two Chinese brothers are eking out an existence as fruiterers. They work long hours in a society that regards them, at best as second class citizens, at worst as a kind of animal. Struggling with English and ostracised by white New Zealanders, their lives are centred on the almost all-male Chinese community of Haining Street.

Wong Chung-Shun, the older brother, is dour and resigned to his life of repression and drudgery. He works to try and save the money to pay for the passage to bring his wife over from China and pay the racist poll tax that is levied on every Chinese person. Wong Chung-Yung, the younger brother, is a poet and a dreamer. He manages to retain an optimistic outlook on life and can escape from the harsh realities of their lives into his music and poetry. Many other Chinese men have nowhere to escape except into the opium dens to blunt their pain.

Katherine McKechnie is married to the boorish, racist, chauvinistic Donald. Her son Robbie adores his father and absorbs his prejudices and hateful attitudes like a sponge. Daughter Edie is intelligent and thoughtful, but largely ignored by Donald. Katherine buys her fresh produce from the Wong's shop and develops a tentative connection with Chung-Yung. She is one of the few customers that treats him as a person.

When Donald drowns after a drunken fall into the harbour, Katherine is left destitute and struggling to

support her children. Chung-Yung repays Katherine's kindness by slipping her extra bits of fruit and vegetables. Their relationship deepens and develops into a physical passion that must be kept hidden from society.

As their lives unfold they are caught up in a web of Edwardian values and world events. Racism, sexism, World War I and the overthrow of the Manchu government in China all impact on Katherine and Chung-Yung, with ultimately tragic consequences.

This book is beautifully written, which is perhaps not surprising, as Alison Wong is an award winning poet. The subject matter is painful to read as it forces us to acknowledge the overt racism towards Chinese people in New Zealand's very recent past. But it was a great treat to read a novel set in the city in which I live, with familiar streets, locations and buildings.

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### **Kathleen Dixon says**

It's hard not to feel ashamed of one's ancestors when our racist past is laid bare. My mother's paternal family were Wellington residents a century ago and I don't imagine they were any different to the majority of white New Zealanders of the time. But if I were to feel shame, then I'd hope that every single person in the world would also feel shame for his and her ancestors, because nobody has been exempt. So I push those feelings aside (with a little note to self to make sure I continue to stand vocally against racism in our current world) and read this book for the pleasure of it.

And this book gave me a great deal of pleasure. The story is old and simple - a pair of star-crossed lovers - but Alison Wong tells it beautifully. It's not just about the love affair (this is no spoiler - the blurb 'advertises' it) but rather about the white woman (Katherine) and the Chinese man (Wong Chung-yung) and who they are. In fact, the affair doesn't begin until halfway through the book.

Who we are is reliant on who the people around us are. We're defined by our relationships as much as by our personalities and interests. And so we learn about Katherine's husband and his excessively racist friends; we learn about Katherine's children - Robbie who idolises his father, Edie who is highly intelligent; we learn about Yung's brother and his wife and his concubine; we learn about Yung's wife in China. The author builds our knowledge of them as if moving from room to room, furnishing a little here, moving on to the next room, adding some detail there, moving on to another.

The tale moves slowly, as does life, and gives poignant voice to these two lovely people and their cultures.

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### **Sally906 says**

This is a debut novel for author Alison Wong. Set in Wellington New Zealand in the early twentieth-century it *AS THE EARTH TURNS SILVER* follows the intersecting lives of two people from two different cultures amid a time when racist policies were being presented to the New Zealand parliament. Chung Yung is a Chinese immigrant who helps his older brother run a fruit and vegetable shop in order to support their families back in China. Katherine McKechnie is struggling to raise two young children after the death of her tyrant of a husband. Katherine's husband had been a tabloid reporter and supported the racist agitator and murderer Lionel Terry. Unfortunately he was able to implant his racist and intolerant attitude into his young

son Robbie before he died.

Katherine buys her fruit and vegetables from the store owned by the Chung brothers. There she meets, make friends with, and gradually falls in love with Chung Yung, the younger brother. The resulting affair takes place at night once the children have gone to bed over the course of the next few years until the start of WWI. When Robbie joins up with the New Zealand Army and leaves to fight in Europe, and his sister goes odd to study to become a doctor. The couple finally feel that they could become more open about their relationship. But, as it is wont to do, fate steps in.

Alison Wong is a good writer. The controversial issues she covered such as racism, women's suffrage and class are handled gently and skilfully. The story is not an in your face read, it plods gently along keeping you hooked until the end arrives, and that is where it came unstuck for me. The end was not a good end for me. Not because it was sad, but it seemed sudden and left me hanging, as if there was more to come but the author forgot to go back and finish. Maybe that was what she had planned all along. But it left me unsatisfied.

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## **DubaiReader says**

Strong characterisations.

This book had a quite unique feel about it; almost resembling the sort of jerkiness between words in the sound of the Chinese language. Perhaps I should describe it as a staccato feel. The chapters were short and to the point, although I found the first few chapters extremely difficult to get into.

There isn't much plot, or, at least, the plot is almost totally revealed in the synopsis, so the book is left to rely heavily on the characters. Fortunately they are well drawn and the reader really senses the cultural differences between the Chinese and the New Zealand populations.

I was not aware that there were so many Chinese in New Zealand in the early twentieth century and it was fascinating that the author's ancestors had been amongst them. She was therefore in a unique position to write this book.

The reactions of the local population to the build-up of war were also interesting, very much mirroring what was happening in Britain at the time.

As Wong says in her Author's Note, many of the political characters mentioned were factual and while WWI was brewing, equally significant changes were happening within China, which greatly affected the immigrant populations.

When we meet Katherine she is married to the obnoxious Donald. Her two children, Edie and Robbie are studious and tear-away respectively. The whole family is traumatised by Donald's death but they all react differently.

Then Katherine becomes attracted to a local Chinese grocer and the repercussions affect everyone.

An enjoyable read that is lifted by the insights into Chinese immigrant life at the time.  
Recommended.

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## **Laila Kanon says**

This is a book club reading material. With my reading list burgeoning, I won't personally choose this book, but hey that's why I joined a book club.

It wasn't loved at the first chapter, I found it rather jarring in the beginning and then halfway through it, it grew on me. I detect a split personality on the style of writing and prose; between writing it as a Chinese or writing it as a Westerner.

While I'm not Chinese but my diverse set of friends and exposure to Chinese culture, I got it when the stories were told from the Wongs' POVs.

To me racial prejudice and hatred are learned vices; no one born with it and as time progress with globalization making its round the globe many times over, yet racial prejudice and hatred persist. Ask yourself this: WHY?

Katherine and Yung have my sympathy; their love for each other was pure but they were born and met in the wrong century and that's the real shame. Fortunately, New Zealand is more accepting these days by the idea of inter-racial marriages and that's what makes this country so unique.

My favorite quote from this book:

"Books can be very good friends, Edie, especially when you are lonely. But don't neglect physical exercise. Learn to walk - and to run - not just with the intellect but also with the heart and the body. Social interaction, fresh air and physical activity will sustain you through many a trial and tribulation." (pg. 173-174)

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## **Zara Marie says**

As the second book in my own little readathon today I read this book, which has been standing on my shelf for over a year. I bought it for a cute love story, and I guess it is. Unfortunately it was late/early and not the type of book I usually read. For me it was just too slow to be honest and I fell asleep during, which could also just be because it was between 2am and 4am.

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