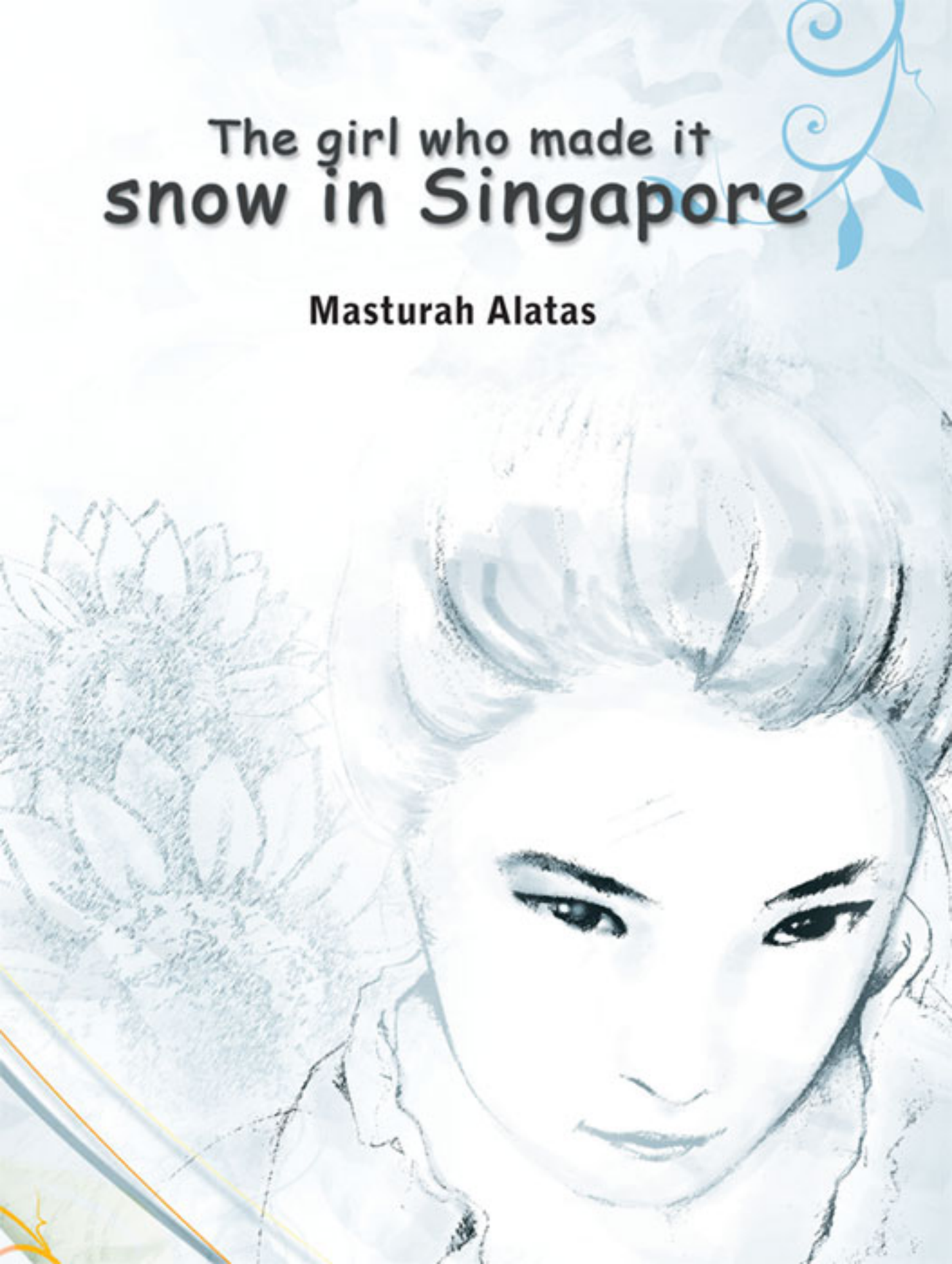


The girl who made it
snow in Singapore

Masturah Alatas



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Dedication

In loving memory of my father, Professor Dr Syed Hussein Alatas (1928 – 2007).
May this book surprise my readers as much as it would have surprised him.

And in gratitude to:

My mother, Zaharah Alatas, for inspiring me to write about the environment

My sister, Munirah, former champion runner, for the stadium and MacRitchie memories

Babsy, who will appreciate the musical dimension to the story

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My husband, Giorgio, and my sons, Giordano and Dario, for being the first to believe in the story

May Ng for the initial contact

Chan Wai Han for the care with which she brought the book into the world

Gerbie Santos Pabilonia for giving Ariana a face

*Be melting snow.
Wash yourself of yourself.*

*A white flower grows in the quietness.
Let your tongue become that flower.*

—Jalaluddin Rumi

*At the end of this sentence, rain will begin.
At the rain's edge, a sail.
Slowly the sail will lose sight of islands;
into a mist will go the belief in harbours
of an entire race.*

—Derek Walcott

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Chapter 1

Miss Lim

*A*riana Hashim's special powers would have never been discovered had it not been for Miss Lim's keen ear for music.

Miss Lim was a music teacher in St Mary's Convent School and Ariana was one of her Primary 3B pupils. Sometimes, though, it was hard to tell the teacher from the pupil.

Miss Lim was twenty-five years old and therefore could no longer be considered a girl. Yet, if she wore St Mary's pink uniform, she might have easily been mistaken for one of the older pupils because she looked so girlish.

Miss Lim was thin and not very tall. She had shoulder-length, straight, black hair and she wore spectacles which she would often push back into position with her index finger when they slid too far down her nose. Miss Lim liked to wear flowery, cotton dresses with sandals. When she stood, her feet pointed slightly inwards. Her short, clean toenails were never painted.

Miss Lim hardly ever smiled. But she pouted. Her small lips would protrude, as if she were waiting for someone to kiss her. Her pupils knew that when she pouted she was deep in thought.

The fact that Miss Lim hardly ever smiled didn't mean that she was a stern and strict teacher, though. On the contrary, her pupils weren't afraid of her at all. But they respected her and looked forward to her lessons.

Miss Lim often encouraged her pupils, and made them feel relaxed and safe. She made her lessons interesting by giving her pupils snippets of information that were cut down to size for their age.

For example, she once told her Primary One class that the word 'piano' comes from the word 'pianoforte', which in Italian means 'soft-hard'.

"Producing music from the pianoforte is all about hitting the black and white keys soft or hard," Miss Lim had said to her Primary One class.

She told her Primary Two class the same thing, just adding that the pianoforte is also called fortepiano — "that is what the 'f' and the 'p' on the music note sheets stand for, so you know where to hit the keys hard and then soft" — and that the fortepiano was invented by the Florentine, Bartolomeo Cristofori, around 1700.

After lessons with Miss Lim, her pupils always felt as though they had learned something important that they would keep within themselves for the rest of their lives. They would go home and eagerly repeat to their parents the new knowledge they had acquired.



Chapter 2

Ariana's voice

It happened one morning when Miss Lim was trying to teach her Primary 3B class the song 'All the more, Singapore' for the upcoming 1999 National Day celebrations. Amidst the childlike chorus, a little bit out of tune, Miss Lim was able to distinguish one beautiful voice coming from the back of the class. She traced it to the corner where Ariana was seated.

"Class, please stop for a moment. Now I want each of you to sing the song one by one," Miss Lim said.

Miss Lim was so curious to hear Ariana's voice on its own, but she didn't want to make her curiosity so obvious. Ariana was quite a shy girl. If she knew that Miss Lim was trying to single her out, it might have made her self-conscious and that would have affected her performance. So Miss Lim called on Shoba to sing first, then Ai Lin, and then, finally, it was Ariana's turn.

Ariana stood up. Ariana was as small as any Primary Three girl should be. But she had presence. She had an aura which commanded attention even if she wasn't doing anything particularly spectacular. Some people said Ariana looked like a powerful, dynamic gymnast because her body was compact and muscular. And she wore her hair in a tight bun. She was the only girl in her school who wore her hair that way.

As soon as Ariana opened her mouth to sing, the most beautiful sounds came out of it. Ariana's voice had a very unusual pitch. It was very difficult to describe. It was a unique blend of female voices characteristic of Chinese wayang, Malay *dondang sayang*, Italian opera and Indian Bollywood songs.

Ariana stopped singing. The whole class was stunned, so stunned that all the little girls broke out into peals of laughter. Ariana herself was smiling. She knew that her classmates' laughter was not laughter of ridicule but it was laughter of amazement.

Miss Lim looked extremely pleased even though she wasn't smiling. Her suspicions had been confirmed. The beautiful voice she had discerned was indeed Ariana's. She simply said "Ariana, that was very nice. Sit down, please, and class settle down now. Let's get back to work."

