



# A Glasshouse of Stars

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Usborne's Press Release mentions the 'unique second-person narrative voice'. So Chapter One begins, 'You have arrived for a better life at the New House in the New Land?; later, when Meixing Lim, the central character, is under extreme pressure, we read, 'You don't know if you are talking out loud or inside your head or what is real and what is just your imagination and if you are writing this story or it is writing you.' Every page is addressed to that 'you' and a reader must feel comfortable with who 'you' is and who is *addressing* 'you'. It is as though Meixing is standing outside herself, watching and talking to herself. Sometimes reading her own mind. Each line is a kind of running commentary, addressed to Meixing by herself about her own actions, reactions, thoughts and emotions. Rather than sharing the perspectives and reflections of a first-person narrator, readers may feel they are over-hearing and seeing that running commentary; they have access to the main character 'who is necessarily ever-present on the pages' but in a different way from that offered by a first- or third-person narrative.

Meixing is living through a desperately confusing, frightening time. The unwavering focus upon her of the second-person narrative works to intensify the tensions and conflicts of her experience. She and her Ba Ba and her Ma Ma have arrived in the alien New Land as immigrants. They have the opportunity to live in the house of First Uncle, who has recently died. Meixing has a mere smattering of the New language 'more than her parents have. Ma Ma is close to giving birth to a second child. Ba Ba finds a poorly paid labouring job where he is exploited. Within a few pages, after a domestic difference of opinion, Ba Ba drives off in his newly-bought 'little junk heap of a car' and is killed in an accident. Local attitudes to immigrants are embodied for Meixing in crude *Go Home* posters stuck on telegraph poles and the combat boots of shaven-headed youths. A next-door neighbour, a recent immigrant herself, is kind, bringing food and advice. But her son, Kevin, bristles with anger towards Meixing 'and everyone else. School for her is isolating and abrasive; a girl, told to look after her, steals the only precious thing she has ' her Ah Ma's gold wedding ring.

Meixing calls her new house 'Big Scary'. In her mind, her home keeps changing colours and shapes, rooms and even people appearing and disappearing, while lights flash on and off from an upper window like a winking eye. Never the most affectionate of mothers, widowed and pregnant, her terrified, penniless Ma Ma has little love or energy left to offer her daughter. For Meixing, the everyday world is suddenly transformed by wild magic belonging more to the Old life than the New ' it is as though 'Big Scary' and its garden mysteriously respond to Meixing's mood and her needs. When numerous Aunties and Uncles arrive for Ba Ba's funeral, Meixing is buffeted between clashing cultures. Among all the

cruelties and menace of life at school, however, she finds an island of firm ground in a special class set up by a very understanding teacher to support Meixing, Kevin and Josh, a more gentle immigrant boy.

Shirley Marr sees herself as having a Western mind and an Eastern heart. She arrived in mainland Australia from Christmas Island as a seven-year old in the 1980s and this debut novel draws on her experience of immigration. There's much to admire and respect about the ambition of both content and technique, but the suggested readership of 9+ seems unrealistic. Many readers of such an age might well feel bewildered by Meixing's overwhelming confusion with its mixture of literal and magical and the strangeness of the Old culture whose presence on the pages seems to outweigh that of the New which readers would find more familiar. And even experienced early teenage readers might struggle to find clarity in the second-person narrative voice.

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