



*Gone Case, A Graphic Novel*

Story by Dave Chua

Art by Koh Hong Teng

Edited by Joyce Sim

Singapore. Book 1 (2010), Book 2 (2011)

Popular culture provides a way for us to understand Southeast Asia and comics gives that insight into the experience of living in this region. Malaysia's Lat is a classic example. His *Kampong Boy*, *Town Boy* and *Mat Som* are snapshots of what it is like growing up in a kampong in the 1950s, living in a small town in the 1960s and finally making that transition to the big city in the 1970s. More autobiographical than anthropological, these stories have endeared thousands of readers and stood the test of time.

Malaysia's immediate neighbor, Singapore, shares common pop heritage with the peninsula (we were part of Malaysia between 1963 and 1965) but the comics industry is not as developed. It is only in recent years that more artists are venturing out of the comfort of the graphic and advertising industry to try their hand at drawing comics for a living.

One such artist is 44 year old Koh Hong Teng, who used to run his own graphic company, but took a pay cut to do comics fulltime. His first graphic novel, *0132* (1996), was inspired by Dave McKean. Koh's return to comics 10 years later was inspired by more humble Singaporean settings, the Housing Development Board (HDB) government flats where most of us grew up in. It was a chance meeting with writer Dave Chua at a comic art opening in 2008 that led to their collaboration to adapt Chua's 1996 novella, *Gone Case*.

Gone Case is the colloquial term to mean one is a hopeless case, a loser. In the original novella, we meet many 'gone cases' – a marriage that is falling apart, a bunch of 12 year olds facing a national examination that will determine the rest of their lives. In the

2-volume graphic novel, the rigid panel and page layout suggests that it is the boxed-in environment of the HDB flats that has trapped the ‘gone cases’ in society. They are trapped by their lower class status and mindset. It throws up the old nature versus nurture debate and at a time when social mobility in Singapore has slowed down, this is a relevant read.



Source: *Gone Case* (Book 2)

Chua uses Singlish (Singapore colloquial English) in his novella to express the inner world of his characters. For the graphic novel, Koh ups the ante by adding in fantastique elements not found in the novella – the sword fighting dream sequence in volume 1 and the gang fight in volume 2 are Koh at his best channeling Hong Kong comics, Geoff Darrow, Moebius and Paul Pope. The depiction of the decomposed state of an old man who died alone in his flat in volume 2 is meant to show more intensely the loneliness of urban living. This is no mere illustrating of the novella into words and pictures, but the new scenes and perspectives added are only possible of the comic art medium, such as the opening scene of volume 1 from a mynah’s point of view. (There is payoff at the end of volume 2 for this.)

If there is one negative about *Gone Case*, it is that this is very much a product of its times, the 1990s when ‘poverty porn’ of HDB heartlanders’ lives are very much in vogue for Singapore literature and films, for example: Eric Khoo’s *12 Storeys* (1997). The climax of *Gone Case* has the two young friends reaching a breaking point in their childhood on a rooftop during a thunderstorm. One shouts out: “I want to tell you to stop

dreaming and get real!” It is a very dramatic scene, but we should only be so fortunate to have such moments of epiphanies in our lives.

For more of Koh’s heartlanders’ tales, see *Ten Sticks and One Rice* drawn by Koh and written by Oh Yong Hwee. As for Chua, he is currently working a ghost story to be drawn by new talent, Xiao Yan. Both are published by Epigram Books in Singapore.

(Reviewed by Lim Cheng Tju)