

## ***Aunty Lee's Delights Lesson Plan 1***

Singapore and Understanding the Cozy Mystery

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### **Overview:**

By combining lecture with a class activity, this lesson introduces students to the cozy-mystery genre, and modern Singapore. This information will equip students to recognize and appreciate the novel's generic and contextual subtleties, and is best suited for the first day of teaching *Aunty Lee's Delights*.

Part of this lesson has been adapted from the "Introduction to Genre Fiction" exercise included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason's *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom* (Fuss and Gleason 199-201).

### **Objectives:**

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Discuss the impact of the setting on the narrative and its characters.
- Identify the key features of a cozy mystery and name several authors or works of cozy mystery.
- Explain how a cozy mystery differs from other common varieties of mystery novels.

### **Materials Needed:**

- Dry erase markers for activity

### **Class Structure:**

*10 minutes:* Framing Activity to Define the Cozy Mystery

- Work with students to create two lists:
  - List # 1 is the characteristics associated with a cozy mystery
    - What elements (characters, relationships, plot points, etc.) does a cozy mystery have?
    - What is the setting?
    - What are the characteristics of their beginnings/endings?
    - Who typically reads this sort of book? Who buys them?
  - List #2 are examples from media (literature, TV, film, video games, etc.)
- Discuss lists with students. The goal here is to determine if there are any brainstorming items that don't belong on the list and to come up with a working definition of what a cozy mystery is

*5 minutes:* Introduction to Cozy Mystery Genre

- Cozies can be serious or tense, as well as light and frivolous. Serves as an "opposite," of sorts, to the hard-boiled mystery
- Generalities:
  - Most often written by women
  - Largely middle class

- o The protagonist isn't a professional detective, police officer, etc. Often she owns a business or is involved in the community in a way that allows her to get extra information about the crime
- o The crime may be murder, but the book isn't violent or explicit. This is not *American Psycho*.
- o Descriptions of food are common
- o The crime happens in a place that isn't "supposed" to have crime.
- o Previously, cozies featured a cast of white people with limited-if-any addressing of racism, postcolonial issues, LGBTQ issues, etc. However, they're getting increasingly diverse.
- Some better-known examples: *Murder She Wrote*, Miss Marple mysteries (and a lot of Agatha Christie's work), Rita Mae Brown, Lilian Jackson Braun' (*Cat Who* series)

### 20 minutes: Class Discussion

\*Note: This part of the lesson can be approached as a freeform discussion. Alternatively, instructors can split the class into small groups, and assign each group one of the passages excerpted at the end of this lesson plan.

- Passages:
  - o Book cover: marketing the book as a cozy mystery
  - o p. 5: discovery of the body
  - o pp. 8-9: connecting the murder mystery with food
  - o pp. 9-10: introduction of Aunt Lee as our detective
- Ask each group to answer the following questions, then reconvene the class to share and discuss results.
  - o Based on the description of cozy mystery, what elements do you already see in *Aunt Lee*? What do you not see?
  - o What questions do you have about either the setting or the genre?
  - o What did we not cover, in terms of context, that you would have liked to discuss?
  - o What are your impressions of the novel so far?
  - o What has surprised you?
  - o What feels familiar?
  - o Why do you think the professor chose this book?

### 15 minutes: Lecture on the Singaporean Context of *Aunt Lee's Delights*

- Explain to students that the cozy mystery, as a genre, is highly influenced by setting. Yu's mystery is particularly shaped by its setting in Singapore in ways that Ovidia Yu does not necessarily explain, in part because she writes with a Singaporean audience in mind. This part of the lesson is designed to provide students with vital context for understanding Singapore of *Aunt Lee's Delights*.
- Ask students what they know about Singapore. Keep a list of student answers on the board.
- Discuss Singapore's geography, history, authoritarian government, economy, and demographics.
- **Geography:** One of the world's few remaining city-states, Singapore occupies a crucial position in Southeast Asia. It occupies southeastern most tip of the Eurasian landmass, at

the end of the Malay Peninsula. Anyone wanting to travel from China to India or from India to China—or from China to Europe—has to pass through the Strait of Malacca and past Singapore.

- It's no surprise that Singapore, which boasts one of the world's great deepwater harbors, is also the world's second busiest container port, behind only Shanghai. The port facilities west of downtown Singapore are always expanding.
- Sentosa Island, mentioned in the novel, lies just south of downtown. That entire island, by the way, functions as a sort of retreat for the city's residents, being home to golf courses, beaches, aquariums, amusement parks, and resorts.
- Singapore has four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil.
- **History:** Despite its ideal geographic location, Singapore is not an ancient city. The modern city was founded by the British; Stamford Raffles of the East India Company purchased the land from the local rulers and established a colony there in 1819.
  - The city grew rapidly during the 19th century. During that time, the Malay Peninsula was exporting massive amounts of rubber and tin, which not only increased trade but also attracted foreign migrants from India (who worked on the rubber plantations) and China (who worked in the tin mines).
  - The colony's first major setback occurred in World War II. Occupied elsewhere, the Royal Navy could not reinforce Singapore, and when the Japanese invaded, the British troops, who were cut off, surrendered en masse. It was, and still is, the largest surrender of British forces in that country's history. Japanese rule, however, proved unpopular. By that time, the majority of the city's inhabitants were ethnic Chinese, and the Japanese suspected that they were sympathetic to their countrymen who were, at that very moment, fighting the Japanese in China. After the war, the colony reverted back to British rule, but everyone, including the British, knew that British imperialism was coming to an end.
  - In 1963, Singapore merged with the other British colonies in the region to form the independent state of Malaysia, but the union did not last long. The reasons were partially financial (comparatively wealthy, Singapore resented having to support its poorer neighbors) and partially ethnic. Singapore was overwhelmingly Chinese—Indians and Malays being a small minority in the city—while the rest of the country was mostly Malay, though ethnic Chinese formed a large and wealthy minority. When Malaysia was formed, the Chinese (who were already economically dominant in the region) became numerically and thus politically dominant as well. Not surprisingly, Malay elites resented that. Tensions resulted in a series of race riots, and in 1965, Singapore was expelled from Malaysia, becoming one of the few countries in history to have independence thrust upon it.
- **Economy:** Singapore did not suffer economically as a result of its independence. The city (which investors considered one of the four Asian Tigers along with Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan) continued to grow and industrialize during the second half of the 20th century, its economy growing by more than 10% each year for 40 years. Today, trade, manufacturing, and tourism form its major industries, and the city's overall success is difficult to overstate. In terms of per capita income, it is one of the richest countries in the entire world (and is often in the top 5).

- **Government:** Throughout most of its modern history, Singapore has been governed—perhaps ruled would be the better word—by one man, Lee Kuan Yew. Prime minister from 1959 to 1990, Lee afterwards remained in the government as a special advisor until 2004. Even though Singapore is theoretically a multi-party democracy, his political party, the People's Action Party, has never been out of power, and for all practical purposes, Singapore is a one-party state.
  - Under Lee, the PAP provided Singapore with a unique form of government, which Lee promoted as a merger between Eastern and Western systems. His administration supported business, property rights, and capitalism, but socially, it ruled authoritatively, and in that sense, Lee's compromise anticipated the approach taken by the communist party in modern China.
  - Then and now, the Singaporean government is famously strict. Chewing gum is illegal, vandalism is punished by public caning (An American teenager named Michael Fay caused an international incident when, against the United States' wishes, the Singaporean authorities caned him for vandalism in the 1990s), and the penalty for drug trafficking is death, Singapore being one of the few industrialized countries that still uses the death penalty.
  - The government also regulates the personal lives of its citizens in more subtle ways. Anyone wanting to own a car in Singapore must pay for the privilege, which currently costs upwards of \$100,000. Most of the housing in Singapore, moreover, is owned by the government, and it has no qualms about rewarding some people with housing while denying it to others. A young couple wanting to start a family may find themselves at the top of the waiting list (the Singaporean authorities being eager to raise the city's low birth rate and promote traditional values) while a homosexual couple might find themselves on the bottom. Particularly for the purposes of understanding *Aunty Lee's Delights*, it is important to know that sex between men was, officially, illegal in Singapore until 2022, though the ban had not been enforced for decades.
  - Such a society may not sound particularly appealing to many Americans, but Singapore is, by many metrics, one of the best run countries in the entire world, and they are proud of that legacy. In terms of crime, it ranks at the very bottom, and in terms of education, it ranks at the very top. According to the most recent PISA results, Singapore is ranked second in the world in reading, math, and science (China being first).
- **Demographics:** You cannot understand Singapore, or *Aunty Lee's Delights*, without having some knowledge of the demographic situation.
  - The city has around 6 million people, which makes it about as big as the Houston metro area, but quite a bit smaller than metropolitan Chicago.
  - Of those 6 million people, 1.5 million are "non-residents." These could be students, foreign businessmen, expatriates, or—more commonly—guest workers brought in to keep labor cheap and provide the city with maids and laborers.
  - Of the remainder, about 75% are ethnic Chinese, around 13% are Malay, and about 10% are Indian (in terms of percentages, there are about as many Malays in Singapore as there are African Americans in the United States).

- The Singaporean government takes a very active interest in preventing ethnic tensions. Its Ethnic Integration Policy, for instance, uses quotas to prevent public housing from becoming segregated.
- **Conclusion:** In short, Singapore is a proud city, an orderly, prosperous place where murder is almost unthinkable, and yet . . . it is also a place where economic and ethnic tensions have been bubbling away beneath the surface for decades.

**Sources:**

Betz, Phyllis, editor. *Reading the Cozy Mystery: Critical Essays on an Underappreciated Subgenre*. McFarland, 2021.

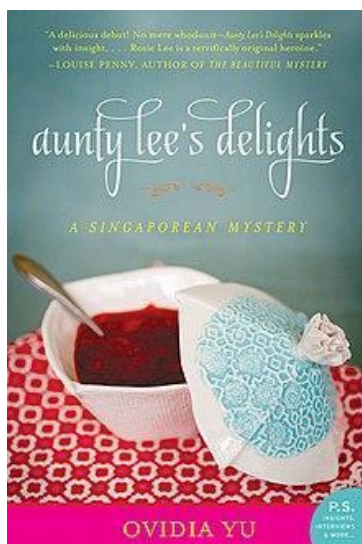
Fuss, Diana, and William A. Gleason, editors. *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*. Princeton University Press, 2016.

Powell, Manushag. "Background on the Cozy Mystery." Detective Fiction, Purdue University, 2/6/24. Class handout.

Yu, Ovidia. *Auntie Lee's Delights*. William Morrow Paperbacks, 2013.

## Relevant Passages:

### “Passage” 1: Book and Cover



- The page itself represents several elements of the cozy. For example, there's clearly food (literally, there's a meal on the cover) involved, which is a frequent part of a cozy mystery. It also labels itself as a mystery, although it implies a difference between other mysteries and the "Singaporean Mystery." The red and white tablecloth also reminds the viewer of the checkered tablecloth. Finally, the title suggests that the "Aunty Lee" character exists, which has several elements of cozy: Aunty Lee is a woman ("Aunt" being a female role), and probably older (you don't call a 20 year old "Aunty").

### Passage 2: p 5

"There's something over there!" she said then, squinting over the beach. It was the most romantic thing he had ever said and she did not want to spoil it just yet by pointing out that she expected anniversary trips far further abroad—Europe, or America, maybe. "Over there. It looks like a jellyfish; is it? It's huge!"

"It's not a jellyfish. It's just a plastic bag . . ."

"Yes, it's a jellyfish—I can see its body and its legs and everything. Can't you see? I think it's dead. Are there poisonous jellyfish around Sentosa?"

They smelled it before they saw it was no jellyfish.

She screamed. He was sick on the sand. Then they put on their gritty sandals and ran back to the hotel to call the police. (5)

- Here we encounter the body, a pivotal scene in any murder mystery, but note the lack of gruesome details.

### Passage 3: p 8-9

Aunt Lee's Delights was a small café shop in Binjai Park, less than five minutes' walk from Dunearn Road. It was well-known for good traditional Peranakan food and famous for the *achar* and sambals Aunty Lee had been selling out of her house for years. Aunty Lee's Delights was also equipped with the latest modern equipment. Though she was revered for cooking the traditional standards, strange dishes occasionally popped up because Aunty Lee loved experimenting. In her view, anything cooked with local ingredients was local food. In fact the shop was very like Aunty Lee herself. Another passion of hers was reverse engineering dishes (and occasionally people) to figure out how they had come about and how they might be better adjusted. She called her kitchen her laboratory for DIY-CSI, the television in there testifying to her two passions, for food and news. (8-9)

- The cozy mystery must combine its two elements (a murder mystery and what we might call "the gimmick"). Here we see the connection between cooking food and solving murders.

### Passage 4: p 9-10

All day Aunty Lee had been following news reports on radio and television and had even sent Nina round to the 7-Eleven to pick up the afternoon papers, but she hadn't learned any more about the body that had been found. She and Nina had overdosed on DJ chatter and music (which Nina had quite enjoyed when Aunty Lee was not changing channels hoping for more news), but all she had gotten were news updates without new information and speculations from phone-in callers. Was it the body of a gambler from the casino? An illegal immigrant dropped off a boat who had failed to swim in to shore? Or an unlucky sailor? Had it been an accident, a suicide, or—most exciting of all—murder? (9-10)

- Note that the "detective" uses her imagination to analyze the crime. There is no real investigation, and even deductive reasoning is minimized. The detective in the cozy mystery relies on a different set of skills. Note, too, that in the cozy mystery murder is something of a game, a sort of pastime for the detective.

From his comfortable smoking spot behind the tall potted plants edging the sidewalk, Harry Sullivan watched the people gathering inside. Though he liked being punctual, he didn't like hanging around inside waiting for food to be served. It made him look too hungry and eager to please. He glanced at his reflection in the window of Aunty Lee's Delights. Though the lights were on inside, it was still bright enough outside for him to see himself clearly reflected. It was not a bad picture. His hair was still all his own and still close to the brown black of the photograph in his passport. Standing five foot eight, he had been considered short back home, but here he was comfortably average. And he guessed he was more than average in other departments too, going by the feedback he had received. He allowed himself a small smile at the memory. (37)

- Here, we're introduced to the first perhaps seedy character. He's literally lurking in the shadows and is concerned about looking "too hungry and eager to please." He has the dark and mysterious "thing," and it even goes so far as to describe his height (taller than the locals) and his sexual prowess ("more than average in other departments").

When she first saw her, Nina had been a scared, skinny little thing who had cried when she could not understand what Mark meant when he insisted on her finding their “special cups”—the glass cups that were kept just for Mark and Selina because they could not drink out of the unbreakable plastic cups Auntie Lee had bought for use in the house. Auntie Lee had even fed Nina the Brands Essence of Chicken that people had given her for Chinese New Year. “Too rich for me,” the old woman said. “The girl needs more strength, more meat on her bones!” Selina had been so furious. Whoever heard of feeding Brands to maids? And those were new bottles, not even expired stock that would otherwise be discarded. Selina was married to the son of the house and Auntie Lee had never worried about her health or offered her Brands Essence. (44-45)

- The protagonist of cozys tends to be an “everywoman” – so, not rich, not poor. The Auntie Lee character is explicitly well off, parting with this tradition, yet has the attitude of a person who is average, up to and including saying that a given food item is “too rich” for her.