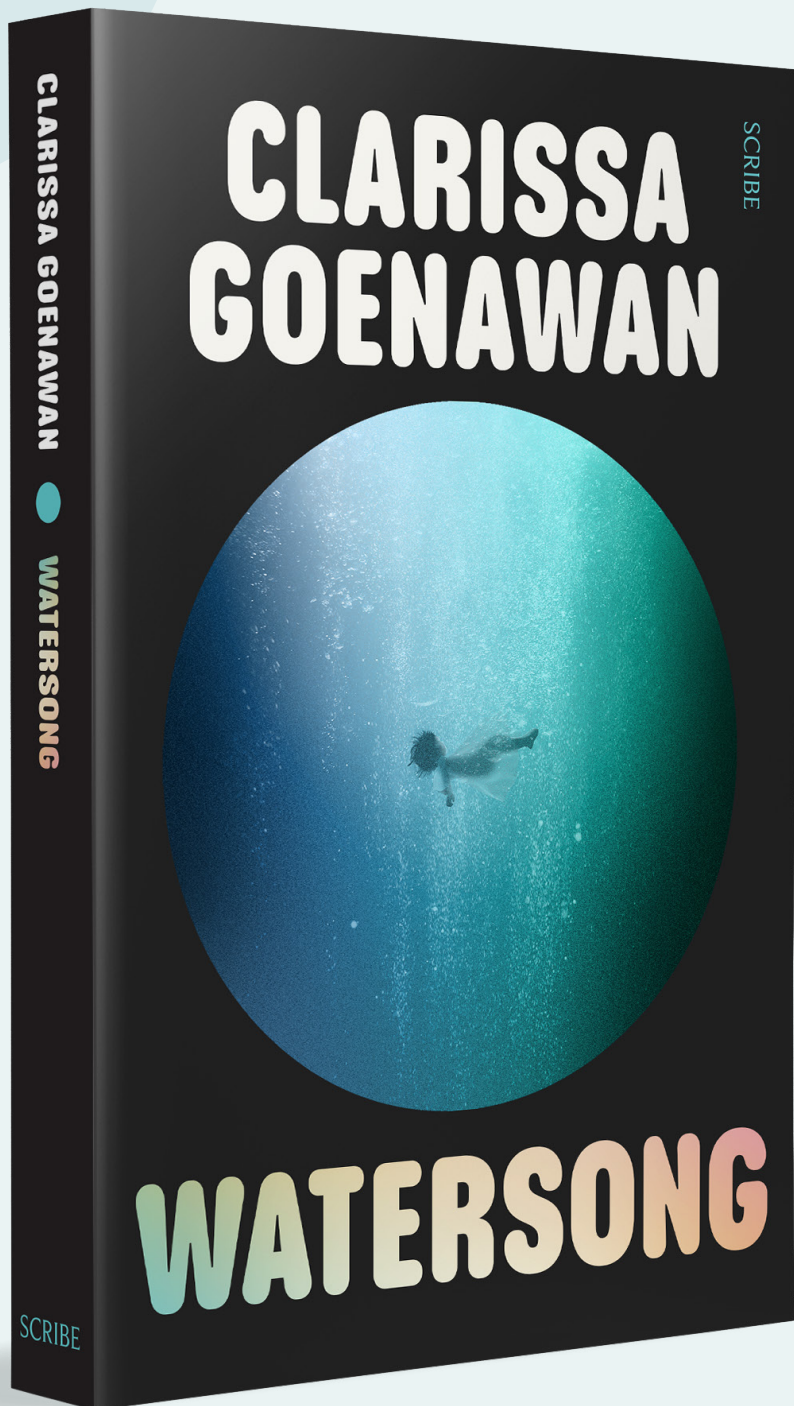


BOOK CLUB NOTES



Dear Book Clubbers,

Do you believe in destiny? Do you think our lives are already predetermined or do we make our future? And what about love? Do you believe that if you're meant to be with someone, fate will bring you together? But how do you know if it's meant to be? What is love, anyway?

These are some of the questions I explored in *Watersong*. It's a story of a young man trying to escape his past through a journey where destiny is challenged, faith is questioned, love is lost and found, and nothing is what it seems.

Watersong is my third novel after *Rainbirds* and *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida*, but it's actually the second one I started. I began writing the first draft back in 2014. It has been eight years in the making — the longest time I've ever worked on a writing project so far — and I couldn't be more proud. Just like the rest of my novels, you'll find many of my favourite things which I hope to share with you: long and leisurely walks, lovely conversation over tea, hotpot on the balcony, a family-run bookshop, and sneaking into a swimming pool on a warm, balmy day.

Thank you so much for picking up *Watersong*. I hope that you'll enjoy reading it and that the story will stay with you for a long time and spark a lot of interesting conversation.

Warm regards,

Clarissa Goenawan

Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of the book, Shouji starts a mysterious new job. Would you do it? Do you think it would be allowed in real life?
2. Mizuki is very private, but Shouji becomes aware of the troubles in her home life. Although Shouji tries to help, the power dynamic in Mizuki's relationship prevents her from taking action. What point do you think the author was making here?
3. Were there any character decisions that you questioned, disliked, or disagreed with? After completing the book, were you able to understand those decisions? What changed?
4. The author writes in simple, sparse, and often understated language. What effect does this have on the story? Can you imagine the same story being told in a different style of writing? How different do you think the resulting story would be, and in what ways?
5. The book deals with many heavy themes. In your opinion, how has the author handled these themes? Has the author managed to influence your thoughts or talk about certain aspects of those themes that had not occurred to you before?
6. Was there anything more you wanted to see from the characters? Were there any issues or complexities you wanted to know more about to know the characters better?
7. What did you think of the twist at the ending of the story? Was it justified?
8. *Rainbirds*, *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida*, and *Watersong* feature many similar aspects. In terms of theme, story, and character, what relationship do you see between the novels?

A conversation with Clarissa Goenawan

Q: Were there any particular books or writers who you looked to for inspiration when writing *Watersong*?

There are a lot of great authors I took inspiration from. I admire J. M. Coetzee and Deborah Levy for their clean prose; Haruki Murakami and Sayaka Murata for their magical stories; Yasunari Kawabata, Hiromi Kawakami, and Banana Yoshimoto for their beautiful and atmospheric writing; Yoko Ogawa and Fuminori Nakamura for their versatility; and Stephen King for his discipline and dedication to the writing life.

Q: With this being your third novel, how do you feel that your writing process and style has changed over the years?

The writing process remains more or less the same. When I started writing, I often didn't know what kind of story it would become. Everything was a surprise to me. There were plenty of developments I didn't foresee, especially in terms of the characters' motivations. That being said, *Watersong* was my most challenging writing project to date — it is an ambitious novel in scope.

Q: Feels tonally very similar to a lot of Japanese translations. You've said previously that you're very inspired by Japan and Japanese literature, but is there anything to this ability to encapsulate this feeling of translation?

My mother tongue is Bahasa Indonesia. When I had just started writing, I was insecure about my English and saw my non-native status as a major weakness. But later on, I realised that perhaps, it is one of my strengths. Many people told me there is a translation quality in my writing style, which suits the kind of story I'm writing.

Q: Your novels are always very ambient and really come to life in the sensory world. Food and drink are particularly vivid in your descriptions. What is the significance of food and drink to you?

I LOVE good food and I enjoy drinking too. I especially love Japanese cuisine. But when it comes to my go-to comfort food, my favourite would be rawon, a Javanese beef soup that has a very rich flavour. I was born in Indonesia and the dish came from my hometown, Surabaya. It never fails to bring fond memories.

I think of food and drink beyond just sustenance — it's also an important part of many cultures and one of the love languages.

Q: What is one thing you'd like readers to take away from reading *Watersong*?

I'll take a rain check for this — I'll leave it to the readers to come up with their conclusions.

Recipes to bring you into the *Watersong* world

#1. Salmon Teriyaki

Salmon Teriyaki is one of my go-to recipes because it's so fast and easy to prepare, and also a crowd-pleaser.

www.instagram.com/p/B_HTwoxAs2C/

Ingredients:

- 500g salmon fillets
- 1 tbsp corn flour / potato starch / plain flour
- 2 tsp vegetable oil
- spring onion, finely chopped
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of teriyaki sauce

Method:

1. Using a brush, coat the salmon fillets with flour.
2. Fry the salmon fillets for 2-3 minutes until they're almost cooked. Put them aside and blot away the oil.
3. Clean the oil from the pan. Pour the teriyaki sauce into the pan and simmer for 2-3 minutes until bubbling.
4. Add the salmon fillets into the sauce and fry for another 1-2 minutes.
5. Remove the salmon fillets and plate them, drizzling the sauce on top. Garnish with chopped spring onion.

Tips:

- Avoid flipping the salmon fillets unnecessarily, or they might break apart. Turning each of them once is enough.
- If you can't find teriyaki sauce, you can create a homemade version by mixing 1tbsp sake, 1tbsp mirin, 1tbsp sugar, and 2tbsp light soy sauce.

#2. Chicken Nanban

Chicken Nanban is a really delicious deep fried chicken dish served with tartar sauce.

www.instagram.com/p/B_MPixPAWRU/

Ingredients:

- For nanban sauce:
 - 2 tbsp light soy sauce
 - 2 tbsp sake
 - 2 tbsp sugar
 - $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp freshly grated ginger
 - 2 tbsp rice vinegar (add this last!)
- 500g boneless chicken (keep the skin)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup plain flour
- Salt and pepper
- 1 egg
- Vegetable oil
- Tartar sauce

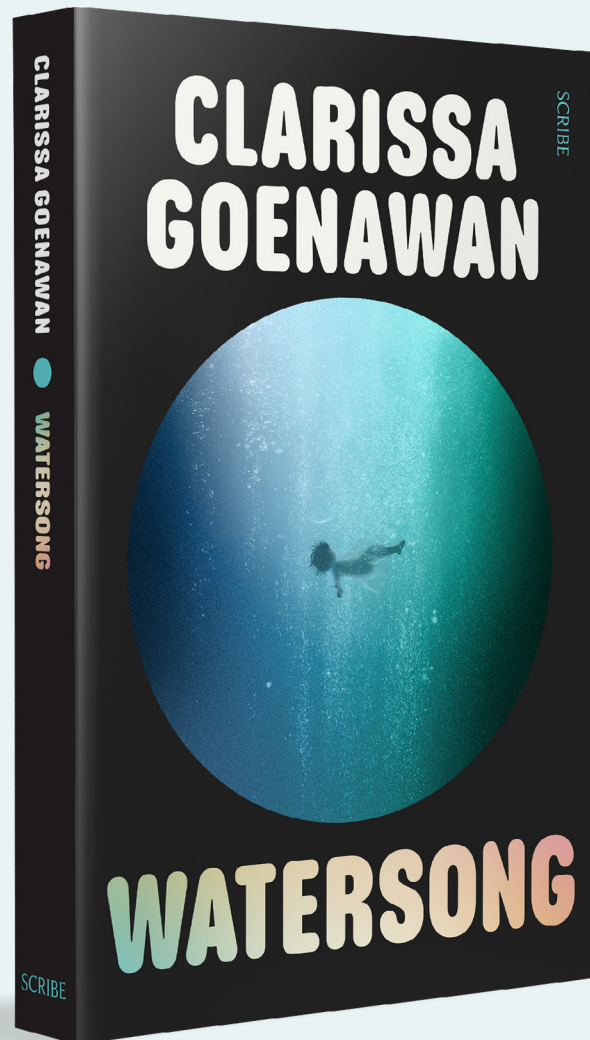
Method:

1. To make the nanban sauce: boil light soy sauce, sake, sugar, and ginger over high heat for about a minute. Turn off the heat and add the rice vinegar. Set aside.
2. Season the chicken with salt and pepper.
3. Dust the chicken with flour.
4. Create an egg wash by beating the egg.
5. Dip the chicken into the egg wash and deep fry it in vegetable oil.
6. Once the chicken is fully cooked, remove it and dip it in the nanban sauce (Step 1).
7. Plate the chicken and pour the tartar sauce on top.

Tips:

- To create a crispier bloom, drizzle the egg wash on the chicken while frying it.
- For a meal, I love serving my Chicken Nanban on a bowl of rice topped with mesclun salad, chopped avocado, and fresh cherry tomatoes. I'd also prepare a bowl of miso soup to complete the meal.

Clarissa Goenawan is an Indonesian-born Singaporean writer and translator. Her award-winning short stories have appeared in literary magazines and anthologies in Singapore, Australia, Japan, Indonesia, Italy, the UK, and the US. *Rainbirds*, her debut novel, has been published in eleven different languages. Her second novel, *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida*, came out in 2020. *Watersong* is her third novel.



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