

# An Evening with Xu Xi

By Velma Roberts, '76



In the evening of **Sep 29, 2011 (Thursday)**, Author **Xu Xi** (MCS Class 1970 – S. Komala) gave a reading from her work and talk about how she pursued her literary passions to create a life for herself as a writer. She discussed how Maryknoll informed her writing and prepared her for the challenge of taking this path.

Maryknoll does make an appearance in her work. *Habit of a Foreign Sky*, her most recent novel, features a high-powered financial executive as the protagonist who is a former Maryknoll girl. That book is dedicated in part to her class of '70. In *Evanescence Isles*, a collection of essays, Xu writes about her school days and makes mention of Sister Rose Duschene who was the principal at the time. There is also a tribute to Mrs. Christine Liao, her secondary school English teacher, in the acknowledgements.

**Xu Xi** ([www.xuxiwriter.com](http://www.xuxiwriter.com)) is the author of nine books of fiction and essays. Her most recent novel *Habit of a Foreign Sky* (2010) was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize and a new story collection *Access: Thirteen Tales* will be published in November by Signal & Press. Her fiction and essays have appeared in numerous international literary journals and is anthologized and taught worldwide. For some eighteen years, the author held a parallel career in international marketing at various multinationals in Asia and the U.S., including Cathay Pacific Airways; Pinkerton's; the Wall Street law firm Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy; Federal Express; Leo Burnett Advertising; *The Asian Wall Street Journal*. In 1998, she finally quit corporate life and surrendered entirely to the writing life. She is currently Writer-in-Residence at City University of Hong Kong where she established and directs the first, international, low-residency Masters of Fine Arts program that specializes in Asian writing in English.

Author Xu Xi, (aka Sussy Komala – our very own MCS graduate from the Class of 1970), gave a passionate reading from one of her latest works (*Habit from a Foreign Sky*) and then talked about why and how she pursued her literary passions to create a life for herself as a writer.

The evening commenced with welcome drinks, canapés and friendly casual conversation with Xu Xi, former Maryknollers as well as current students. We then proceeded to the Prayer Room where we could all comfortably sit and listen to Xu Xi's readings from her book, *Habit of a Foreign Sky*. Maryknoll makes an appearance in this book, which features a high-powered financial executive as the protagonist, who is a former Maryknoll girl. The book also investigates the effects with what happens when women no longer are daughters, wives, and mothers, a very interesting social concept that definitely warrants some consideration and thought.

Xu Xi then went on to speak of how she became interested in writing and how Maryknoll nurtured her talent. She discussed the style of her writing as well as discussing in detail the creative writing process. It became clear that Xu Xi's upbringing also has a major effect on her writing style and her perception and personification of the major characters in her books.

We then opened up the discussion to questions from the audience and Xu Xi was quickly inundated with questions on all aspects of her life as a writer. There was so much interest from our current students that the evening went on a lot longer than expected. The students were obviously very interested in hearing about what it takes to become a successful published writer. I must say, I was very impressed with our girls and the excellent and intelligent questions raised that evening. We were also happy that we had the students give us their feedback of the evening.



## Feedback from some students (Forms 5 & 6):

It was an amazing experience to meet Xu Xi. 'Writers' to us are often only nice names printed neatly on book covers. Rarely do we feel the presence of the writer between the lines. However, this time I had the chance to meet a writer in person, to listen to her reading excerpts from her works, and even to look beyond the story itself, and understand the writer's thoughts behind — why she is interested in exploring the topic, why she shapes her characters this way and why she develops her story in such a way. Her sharing on how she became a writer and her days as a Maryknoller was also very inspiring. She reminded us that anything we observe in everyday life can become our writing material, and as long as we have something to say about human nature, words will flow from our pens. I think it is an important experience for a student of literature to meet a writer, as conversation with a writer allows us to view a story from the writer's point of view, so that we can understand more about the creation of literature and gain insights on analyzing literature.

I had never been to sharing sessions by writers before, so I had no idea what to expect when Xu Xi's sharing came around, but it was definitely an eye-opening experience. Having a writer read their works to you is something I consider very intimate, and Xu Xi's charisma only adds to the story's charm. Also, an aspiring writer myself, this sharing has been very inspirational, especially since Xu Xi is a former Maryknoller and seems much more relatable and close to us than other writers, and has motivated me to pursuing a career in creative writing as well.

The evening with Xu-xi is a pleasant experience. What she had shared, about her family, her secondary schooling in Maryknoll or her career, was interesting and inspiring. I was particularly impressed when she told us that writing or studying literature is a journey of discovery. She would therefore write about objects that she wasn't familiar with rather than things she knew very well. Besides, she had a special approach to recommend books to her students which was to read a few lines from the context and asked them to read the one they felt least interested in. This would be very different from what ordinary people are doing. We are unwilling to try new things because we feel uneasy facing a situation filled with uncertainties. However, Xu-xi reminded us that writing something that is new not only offers us a chance to have a deeper understanding of that object or incident but also provides us with a good way to explore ourselves.

Meeting a writer is always an exciting experience, because as a reader, I am curious to know if he/she is the brilliant or not. After reading in the book. After the sharing, I found that she was a truly amazing person. Her focus on writing in primary school shows her inspired to continue, observing and writing.

I am glad that I had the opportunity to meet with a writer and attend her sharing about her career as a writer. Her advice on choosing one's career path as well as overcoming writer's block were very helpful, and I appreciate how willing she was to answer our questions. Her encouragement gave me motivation to work towards my career goal and look at my future in a positive way.

Hearing the writer share her experiences and describe her passion for writing has rekindled and further encouraged my own interest in writing. I could never express how much I have taken away from those two hours with the writer. Her story, which she so eagerly shared with us, conveys a truly motivating message to all of us who envision a future as a writer - it is never too early nor too late to start writing. She willingly disclosed her own writing habits - also painting a vivid image of how her life, a life of a writer, is. It was also fascinating, to hear from a former Maryknoller, how the school itself contributed to her career as a writer. As a Maryknoller, her past experience and childhood is easy to identify with. The way she related her own childhood and secondary school years is so heartwarming and familiar, that it is hard not to feel involved in her story - sharing the same passions and troubles, the same joys and sorrows. All in all, the meeting was a success due to its intimate setting, which created such a warm and relaxed atmosphere for us to learn from such a prolific author.



"Evening with Xu Xi" was my first time to interact with a writer. Unlike a typical seminar or her creative writing talk this summer; it was a dialogue between messenger and decoder, as if the sculptress of miniatures emerged herself from paper.

That night, Xu Xi momentarily put aside her personae and told her own story of quitting less important obligations and pursuing what really mattered. When she read to us the first chapter in *Habit of a Foreign Sky*, literature took on more intimacy as I imagined a world seen through the spectacles of a former Maryknoller. We saw, along the chasms of English literature in Hong Kong, the blossoming of our alma mater's vibrant representations.

The highlight lay in the forum that followed. In response to floor questions, Xu Xi unveiled the genesis of her several works, and discussions often reached such depth unattained by mere autobiographies or epilogues. We also consulted her about writers' block, language arts-related university programmes, book publishing and developing round characters etc. Our witty mentor gave humorously profound replies, which I thought were truly inspiring.

I love reading and writing as well. At times the frustration faced by most counterparts resonates strongly, but Xu Xi reassured us that writing is a rewarding challenge, since the characters themselves interplay and we never know where words may take us. Though uncertain whether I will stumble on a similar career, I am hopeful that if I choose what is right for me, I will not land far from who I want to be.

I would like to take the chance to thank ISA for organizing the event to make this encounter with Xu Xi possible. I think the evening was amazing as we don't only learn more about Xu Xi, but also more about what creative writing is and what makes a good story. The enlightening conversation would surely be inspiring me in my future attempts of developing my own writing styles and the encounter further strengthened my passion for words. I had gained a lot. Thank you.

I have to say I had a very pleasant evening with Xu Xi last Thursday. It was a humorous and inspirational lecture. The evening was well organized, so meaningful discussions could take place. The atmosphere was relaxing and the participants were attentive. I was glad to see her books being sold outside the program room. All in all, Xu Xi had opened my eyes to the world of creative writing and I had enjoyed the interesting sharing. I hope such encounters with writers can be held more often.