



Thea Lim's book *An Ocean of Minutes*, draws on the best of old and new CanLit

By **TARA HENLEY** Special to the Star
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In the age of widespread refugee crises, weather events, data mining, corporate greed and totalitarian politics, dystopian narratives are very much on the brain. Toronto writer Thea Lim taps into this trend with her timely debut, ***An Ocean of Minutes***, which draws on the best of old and new CanLit traditions.

The novel follows twentysomething Polly — a furniture upholsterer — and her bartender boyfriend Frank, who are madly in love. The year is 1981 and a pandemic is sweeping America. The couple get stuck in Texas, and Frank becomes infected. To get the treatment that will save his life, Polly agrees to enter into a contract with the TimeRaiser corporation, travelling twelve years into the future and working off her subsequent debt to the company. The couple promise to meet in 1993 in Galveston, to proceed with plans for marriage and children.

But when Polly lands, the year is actually 1998, and nothing is as expected. As a second-class citizen in a breakaway republic, her movements are curtailed and the state is always watching. TimeRaiser is a complex bureaucracy that requires endless patience to navigate. Frightened neighbours turn each other in. Migrants toil away at manual labour, subsisting on rationed food, many unable to understand English or to obtain information on the whereabouts of family. Polly, meanwhile, must risk all to hang on to the love that's defined her life.

The clear-eyed, evocative writing here is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood, and anyone familiar with *The Handmaid's Tale* will find resonance in these pages. Similarly, Lim draws on the New CanLit, tapping into its energetic focus on social justice, using fiction to probe our contemporary reality — in all its staggering inequality. *An Ocean of Minutes* is, in fact, a study in the ways in which such inequality destroys lives, drives people to desperation and separates them from those they love most.

Lim may be writing in the CanLit tradition, but her voice is all her own. The author — who grew up in Singapore, holds an MFA from the University of Houston and previously published a novella *The Same Woman* — comes into her own here, with prose that's elegant and haunting, somehow managing to be both unsentimental and deeply moving at the same time. A devastating debut.

Tara Henley is a writer and radio producer.

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