

Emily Lim-Leh



Little Hero



PENGUIN BOOKS
LITTLE HERO

Emily Lim-Leh lost her voice to a rare voice affliction Spasmodic Dysphonia in 1998. In her journey to recover her lost voice, she found a new God-given voice in writing when she emerged a winner in the Singapore Book Council's First-Time Writers and Illustrators Publishing Initiative in 2007 for her debut picture book, *Prince Bear & Pauper Bear*. She followed this with three more Toy titles, and her Toys series has since been translated into four languages and published in six countries.

Emily has authored over forty children's picture books. She is the first person outside North America to win three IPPY Awards in children's books, and the first in Southeast Asia to win the Moonbeam Children's Book Award.

Emily was named Mediacorp's Singapore Woman Award Honoree for inspiring readers through her books. She is also a recipient of the Covid-19 Public Service Medal (from the Prime Minister's Office in Singapore) for her voluntary collaboration with private and public healthcare professionals to produce informational e-books for the community during Singapore's Covid fight.

Little Hero is Emily's first adventure in writing a children's chapter book, as inspired by her family's stories.

Emily blogs about books and parenting her son (and her muse) at her blog <https://mummumstheword.wordpress.com/>

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For Dad, whose childhood stories inspired this book

For Caleb, Isabelle, and Annabel

Always remember our family's stories and past exploits!

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Introduction

This work of fiction is inspired by real-life events in my family's life, with the main character, Xiong, based on my father and his recollection of his childhood and family's stories. Names have been changed, characters fictionalized, and my family's tale woven together with a dose of imagination. However, the significant parts are true and beyond what I could have conceived.



*Author's father (the youngest child in the photo),
together with his parents, two older brothers and cousin*

Chapter 1

New Beginning

Seven-year-old Xiong was excited and slightly anxious about his first day of school. It was the start of a brand new year. The Japanese invaders had left Singapore, a few months after their surrender in September 1945. Xiong had lived almost half his life under Japanese occupation. He had gone hungry on many days as food was expensive and scarce during that time. He had been overfed with fear on many more days as Ma dished him scary stories about cruel Japanese soldiers who tortured people. As a result, Xiong had grown scrawny and timid. But since the Japanese invaders surrendered, he had shot up in height within a few months, like the lanky jackfruit tree springing up in the middle of their tiny attap hut. As far back as he could remember, this tree had been part of their home—a piece of sweet-smelling immovable furniture in their very sparse hut.

Pa said that their hut had been built on the only scrap of land available for their family in Kampung Silat, which

was next to the railway tracks that ran north to Malaya. The other plots of land had already been occupied when Pa and Ma moved there. Ma had felt it would be bad luck to uproot a plant growing in the muddy soil where they were building their hut. So they left the plant alone and covered the ground around it with big pieces of waterproof sheets. The young plant thrived indoors and grew into a rather big tree that now pushed against their flimsy attap roof.

The schools had reopened after the Japanese left, just as Xiong reached school-going age. Now, he leaned against the scaly tree trunk, fumbling with his shirt buttons as he got ready for school as a Primary One student. The smallest-sized school shirt that Ma could buy hung awkwardly on Xiong's skinny frame, looking way too big for him.

'It's uncomfortable,' Xiong said meekly as his stiffly starched shirt collar scratched against his neck. He wanted to wear his singlet and cotton shorts that he was so used to.

'Don't complain *lah*. You are lucky that you can go to school,' Ma said as she combed Xiong's hair hastily. 'Now, go! Don't be late for your first day of school.'

'Xiong, eat your breakfast along the way,' second brother, Ming, said as he walked into the hut with four slices of bread from the open-air cooking area behind their hut. He handed Xiong two slices and wolfed down his own share. Then he straightened his thick-rimmed spectacles and grabbed his school bag hurriedly.

Ming could not wait to go back to school. He had missed over three years of classes when the Japanese soldiers occupied Singapore. His love for learning and reading was well known to everyone in Kampung Silat. So, a kind young teacher living down the road gave Ming free lessons

in English and mathematics through the war years. Now, at eleven years old, Ming was able to return to school at the same level that he would have been in if the war had not happened. With Xiong now going to the same school, Ming was eager to show his younger brother around.



‘*Ji bia,*’ Xiong addressed Ming in the respectful way that a younger sibling would address his second eldest brother. ‘How come *tua bia* doesn’t need to go to school?’

‘Ay, small fry, mind your own business,’ eldest brother, Hao, chided Xiong as he emerged from his makeshift bedroom at one corner of the hut. Hao’s sleeping mat

used to be next to Ming and Xiong on the opposite side of the tree from Pa and Ma. Now, at twelve years old, Hao considered himself a young adult and had created his own sleeping area away from his younger brothers. He copied what Pa and Ma had done—he nailed a clothesline across his corner of the hut and hung a big sheet of cloth on it for privacy.

‘I am big already and I have more important things to do than to attend school. Who is going to help Ma sell cloth? Cannot be you, right?’ Hao said in a grumpy tone.

Hao never admitted to anyone that he hated school because he couldn’t keep up with his lessons. He found reading particularly difficult. Having missed school these few years, he would probably have to attend the same class with students three years younger than him if he returned back. Although Hao was only a year older than Ming, he stood over one head taller. Hao had a handsome face like Pa. But unlike the rest of the family, he had a broad muscular frame and was way bigger than most kids of his age. He knew that he would stick out like a sore thumb if he were to attend the same class as children much younger than him. Hao was secretly relieved when Ma accepted his offer to help her with her small cloth business instead of sending him back to school.

Xiong inherited Ma’s petite frame and was smaller than most boys his age. He was afraid of his hot-tempered eldest brother and asked no more. He munched on his two slices of plain bread and chased after Ming who had started walking down the dirt road in the direction of their school.

'You will enjoy school,' Ming said with a smile when Xiong caught up with him. 'You will learn useful things and make new friends.'

Xiong nodded agreeably as he looked at his second brother with admiration. Ming had a pleasant face and scholarly air about him. He spoke politely and intelligently. And he was well-liked by all his teachers who saw him as the perfect student.

I guess school won't be so bad, with Ming around, Xiong thought. The teachers will be nice to me when they find out that I am their favourite student's younger brother. After school, I can play outside now that the war is over. How nice that those difficult years are finally behind us!

Xiong could not have imagined how wrong he would be!



A TALE OF SEPARATION, LOSS, AND GROWING-UP IN POST-WAR 1940S SINGAPORE

Seven-year-old Ying Xiong looks forward to life in post-war Singapore after the Japanese invaders surrender in September 1945. However, a new war begins at home when Xiong's father decides to return to his homeland in China. This tears the family apart when he takes Xiong's two elder brothers with him.

Xiong navigates his childhood years alone as his mother ekes out a livelihood in Singapore. He makes a friend in Kampung Silat, follows a fearsome teenage gangster in Silat Road, and encounters a brave young police inspector who becomes his neighbour. Through all this, Xiong comes to realise what it means to be a 'hero', which is also the meaning of his name Ying Xiong.

Little Hero is a work of fiction inspired by real-life events from the childhood years of the author's father in post-war 1940s Singapore and beyond.

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Children's Fiction



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