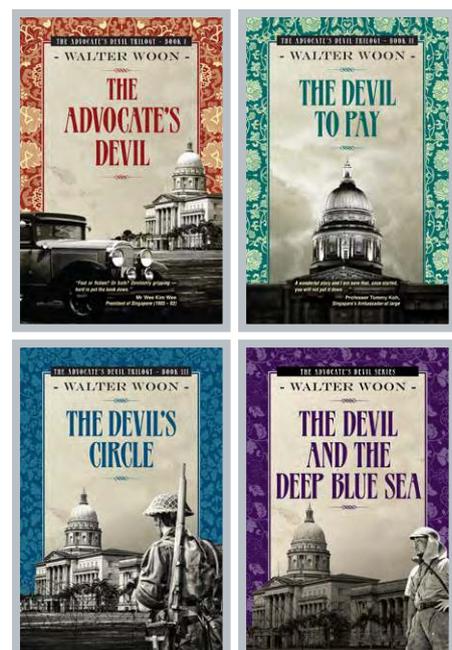


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Q&A with Professor Walter Woon, SC on “The Advocate’s Devil” Series

For Singapore’s National Day 2021, the 15-episode English period drama, “*This Land is Mine*”, premiered on Mediacorp’s [meWATCH](#) and Channel 5. Based on Professor Walter Woon SC’s 2011 novel, *The Devil’s Circle*, the series is inspired by historical events set in Singapore during the British Military Administration. It unfolds stories of the tumultuous “new normal” in post-war Singapore, against a backdrop of family turmoil, betrayal, courtroom intrigue and struggle for power. In this interview, Professor Woon lets us in on his motivations for penning *The Devil’s Circle*, which is part of a four-part series called *The Advocate’s Devil*, as he relates timeless take-aways to the practice of law.





What inspired you to write *The Advocate’s Devil* four-part series?

““ *The Advocate’s Devil* is a four-part series that comprises *The Advocate’s Devil* (2002), *The Devil to Pay* (2005), *The Devil’s Circle* (2011), and *The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (2014). *The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* fills the gap between *The Devil to Pay* and *The Devil’s Circle*, so chronologically it is the third book although written after *The Devil’s Circle*. The Quartet spans the period from 1937 to 1945.

The first story in *The Advocate’s Devil* “The Body in Question”, is adapted from a story I wrote which had won a minor prize in the National Short Story Competition in the mid-1990s. The protagonist featured in the original story was Eurasian. Before “The Body in Question”, I wrote “Sinclair’s War”, which had placed third in the Asiaweek (a now defunct news magazine) short story competition in the early 1990s. Once again, the protagonist in “Sinclair’s War” was Eurasian.

There was very little literature written about the Baba-Nonya (Straits Chinese) community, which is distinctively Singaporean. I realised that I don’t know much about Eurasians because I am not a Eurasian myself. Hence, I decided to write something about my Baba community.

Traditionally, a ‘devil’ is someone who stands in for another lawyer; this no longer the practice in Singapore. However, rather than deviling for his boss Clarence d’Almeida in court cases, the protagonist Dennis Chiang assists when d’Almeida gets involved in investigations on the side.

How did Mediacorp convince you to spin the book off into a mini-TV series?

““ Lee Thean-Jeen (TJ) read *The Devil’s Circle*, and was intrigued by how the series was written from a Singaporean’s point of view. Most of the books and stories about the War were written by white men from a white man’s perspective. Moreover, there was practically nothing about the immediate post-War period. He approached me some years ago for an option to turn *The Devil’s Circle* into a TV series. TJ and his crew from Weiyu Films (a content-creation and production company founded by TJ himself) then persuaded Mediacorp to produce the series based on *The Devil’s Circle*. Similarly, Mediacorp was also interested in producing the series because the novel was written from a local’s perspective. A local voice had always been absent from such stories.



Photo credit: Mediacorp

Why did you create a character who is a local Singaporean lawyer for *The Advocate’s Devil* series? How did you draw inspiration and parallelisms from your experience in legal practice?



Many of the stories I wrote dealt with the real-life legal problems. There are many human-interest stories that can be drawn from the practice of law.

The first story in *The Devil’s Circle* was about the trial of a minor war criminal, a member of the Kempeitai who was accused of torturing people. There were in fact such trials in Singapore immediately after the War. *The Devil’s Circle* drew inspiration from the some of the real cases.

Though the plot in *This Land is Mine* is different from my novel, they kept the names of the major characters. However, it is a completely different work and only loosely based on my book. The actor playing Clarence d’Almeida, a key character in the novels, had medical problems at the start of filming and could not carry on. This of course threw everything off, so the final product is not the same as the source material.

How do the takeaways and lessons from your book can apply to the current and future generations of lawyers?

“ In my other books, I wrote about legal problems such as the conflict of laws and company law issues that are relevant to the current generation of lawyers.

I dealt with situations that could be real problems, for example how does one prove a case that involves a pair of identical twins who have been accused of raping a woman? It is easier to discuss these legal issues in a fictional context rather in an academic book.

In *The Devil’s Circle*, Dennis Chiang is assigned to defend a Kempeitai officer who has been accused of torturing civilians. As a result, Dennis faces intense criticism from his family and the public because of the atrocities carried out by the occupying Japanese forces in wartime Singapore. Defending such an unpopular accused raises an ethical issue on the moral obligations of professionals.

Lastly, how do the takeaways and lessons link with the brand values of RHTLaw Asia, which are Rigorous, Holistic, and Trusted?

“ I hope readers of my books, especially lawyers, will recognise some of these situations still do have a contemporary resonance. I trust that RHT lawyers will do the right thing, because it is so easy for lawyers to lie for the client and make up a defence. At RHTLaw Asia, we must do things right all the time, even when the client does not like or want to hear it. It is our job as legal counsel to advise clients and sometimes tell them that we can’t do it that way. These are the kind of values that we need to inculcate in the younger generation of lawyers.

Of course, I am happy to hear from anyone who has any comments on the historical or legal aspects discussed in my books. It would be interesting to spark a discussion among Singaporeans and conduct an analysis of the legal, cultural, and historical aspects of the Quartet. History is important. Who we are today is a result of what happened in the past.



About the Author



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Professor Walter Woon is a Senior Consultant and Non-Executive Chairman of RHTLaw Asia. Through his career, Professor Woon has held several prestigious positions and has had experience in legal practice, diplomacy and academia both locally and internationally.

Professor Woon has appeared in the High Court and Court of Appeal on many occasions, representing the President as co-counsel in Constitutional Reference No 1 of 1995, which is the only case heard by the Constitutional Tribunal to date.

He is author of several law books, including *The ASEAN Charter: A Commentary* (2015); *Walter Woon on Company Law* (now in its third edition, edited by Professor Tan Cheng Han), a standard text on company law used in law and business schools in Singapore. In addition, he is also the author of reference works such as *The Companies Act of Singapore: An Annotation* (originally co-written with Andrew Hicks, now forming the basis of Woon’s Corporations Law); and *Towards a Rules-Based Community: An ASEAN Legal Service* (with Jean-Claude Piris).

He has also published articles in the *Malayan Law Journal*, the *Malaya Law Review*, the *Securities*

Industry Review, the *Law Society Journal*, the *Singapore Academy of Law Journal*, the *Australian Journal of Corporate Law*, the *Pacific Rim Law and Policy Journal*, the *Korean Society of International Law Journal* and the *Chinese (Taiwan) Yearbook of International Law and Affairs*.

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