Vancouver author Lydia Kwa’s third novel is all about pain – both physical and psychological – in the life of protagonist Natalie Chia. She is a gay, middle-aged acupuncture doctor as well as an incest survivor and practitioner of *kinbaku* or Japanese erotic rope bondage.

Kwa’s luminous debut novel *This Place Called Absence* was published in 2000. It tells of a lesbian clinical psychologist and incest survivor who is coping with the suicide of her elderly father. The novel was shortlisted for several prizes, including the Best First Novel in Canada Award. Though *Pulse* treads on similar territory, the story is lacklustre in comparison.

At the outset, Natalie receives a letter from her friend Faridah, whose adult son Selim has just committed suicide in Singapore. She would like Natalie to attend his memorial service there. During a previous trip, Natalie spent time with Selim; she learned that he was gay and shared her fondness for *kinbaku*.

During high school in Singapore in the 1970s, Natalie had a three-year affair with Faridah. Natalie’s father found them together, punished his daughter severely and Faridah broke off the relationship. Bitter and confused, Natalie immigrated with her parents to Toronto. Two years later, Faridah got pregnant, married a homophobic man named Adam and had two children.

Natalie returns to Singapore for Selim’s funeral, but her stay there is replete with conflicts. Not only is she still in love with Faridah, but she feels guilty about not revealing Selim’s secrets earlier; perhaps if she had, Selim would still be alive. A crisis ensues when Natalie discovers some unsavoury information about Adam. She must then decide whether or not to disclose Adam and Selim’s secrets to Faridah.

From chapter to chapter, Kwa’s taut, lucid narrative shifts back and forth from the present to the past. “Memories hurt us,” she states. “Or is it truer to say that it’s our refusal to release ourselves from the past that’s the cause of our pain?”

Throughout the novel, the metaphor of bondage serves as a vehicle for connecting the characters. Unable to obliterate the past, Natalie still bears the emotional wounds of Faridah’s rejection in addition to the physical scars of her father’s whippings. Yet she remains duty bound to her parents, in spite of enduring years of abuse by her father. As for Selim and Natalie, they are linked by their common interest in *kinbaku*.

The aptly chosen book title has a double meaning. It refers to the sexual pulse between the two women and the apothecary shop owned by Natalie’s grandfather, which was called Cosmic Pulse. Natalie later adopted the name as her moniker for a *kinbaku* chat room that she and Selim frequented, unbeknownst to each other.

The main drawback of *Pulse* is the two-dimensional quality of the characters, especially Natalie and Faridah. As readers, we simply don’t feel any sparks between them. Nor are we privy to their interior lives.

The novel also suffers from an overabundance of irrelevant information, such as pages and pages about films that Natalie and Faridah watched as teenagers. Other examples include needless references to Singaporean history, the Raffles Hotel and the smorgasbord of foods eaten by the characters.
On the other hand, the narrative fails to address a number of pertinent issues. For example, why does Natalie still live with her parents after undergoing sexual abuse by her father for many years? As for Faridah, what else has she done with her life besides being a wife and mother? Furthermore, what does Adam do for a living and what attracted him to her?

The omission of such details renders the story less convincing, especially the ending, which will likely strike readers as too coincidental.

Bev Sandell Greenberg is a Winnipeg writer and editor.

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