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SOUTHEAST ASIAN REVIEW OF ENGLISH

NO 36 / JUNE 1998

KDN PP 4013 / 8 / 97

SOUTHEAST ASIAN REVIEW OF ENGLISH

No. 36 June 1998

MACLALS
Department of English
University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

ISSN 0127 046X
KDN PP4013/8/97

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IT BEGINS AND ENDS WITH DEPRIVATION

Ollie's Search for Golden Hope and Other Stories
by Syed Adam Aljafri

Pub: Heinemann
No. of pages: 116

Review by Carol Leon
12 May 1993 *New Straits Times*

Ollie's *Search for Golden Hope and Other Stories* is an interesting collection of short narratives that mainly present aspects of contemporary Malaysian life.

The writer's focus seems to be the modern, urban, middle-class Malaysian. They are a new and unusual species. For all their sense of normal and self-sufficiency their lives are determined and moulded by forces which they ardently subscribe to but which duly malign them.

In most of these stories the writer attempts to demonstrate how the social milieu, though a superficial trapping of existence, bears an inordinate, often lethal influence on man's psyche, and he tries to delve into what goes on inside the individual and society.

The book boasts a large, multi-racial cast; all of them caught up in the tricky business of day-to-day living. It is a task they vigorously throw themselves into but, unfortunately, one they do not give much thought to. The result is often disastrous.

In `Prize-winner' Kanakapillai (an accountant) is a typical, urban Malaysian whose life is striking only because it is marked by a "sensible" monotony. A collector of stamps and for five consecutive years vice-chairman of the local chess-masters club, Kana's problem begins when he discovers to his utter dismay that the winning entry of a writing competition fails to comply with the rules governing the word-limit.

This deviation from the specified startles him for Kana finds refuge in norms and regulations. This solace we find, however, is misleading and ill-prepares the individual for the challenging often conflicting situations life frequently dishes out to unsuspecting mortals: "Life was one-sided, life was unfair unlike arithmetic and accounting where exactitudes prevail." And so the flouting of the rules unsets Kana's delicate sensibility.

Though the whole situation is bizarre, it is thought-provoking for it shows how modern, electronic living - prescriptive and rigid -.can gradually take its toll on man's ability to reason. Indeed man's mind can explode at the slightest provocation or threat and Kana is finally admitted to an asylum.

Materialism looms large and menacingly in the lives of the people in this collection. Ollie and his band of friends in `Ollie's Search for Golden Hope' prospect for gold hoping to find the "mother-lode". Lured by their golden visions, they become vulnerable, greedy and foolish. Relationships flounder: "The jolly camaraderie that had bonded them in the planning stages and held them together in the first two camps was earring thin." All the men except for Ollie suffer a tragic end.

Indeed, tragedy and death signal the end of most of the stories here. It marks the end of the other striking tale `It Begins

and Ends With "So What!"', The story discusses the death of a sibling and the devastating effect of that tragedy made worse when the protagonist, Cheng, refuses to confront it. Cheng throws himself into his studies and, later, his work but every achievement amounts to "so what!"

To seek freedom from the pain of his loss and the uncertainty of life he develops a reckless, crazed obsession for speeding cars which is symbolic of the peripatetic life led by most city dwellers. Detached from the others, Cheng also grows in his own self for within lies only a gaping void. And so it goes for many of the characters in this collection. They are unable or perhaps incapable of finding inner peace and strength.

`The Reflection' focuses on the impressions and perceptions of a young person. The child Krishnan learns too soon about the painful reality of death. As he enjoys a magical night in the jungle mesmerised by the reflection of the moon on the pool, his mother lies dying in hospital. One detects a touch of Hemingway here in the juxtaposition of a life-giving experience and a heart-wrenching one. (A similar pattern appears in `On Guard for Ever'. The security guard Mat Amin survives the bullet wound during a shoot-out at the goldsmith shop only to later discover that his much loved son was killed in a bank heist on the same day.) And so Krishnan is deprived of his youthful innocence and mirth.

In fact, deprivation is a major theme in these stories. It can be material, mental or spiritual and they shatter the human spirit.

Melancholy, however, is certainly not the general tenor. There is much humour as the writer gleefully pokes fun at human

nature and its various foibles. Perhaps the first thing that strikes the reader is the uniquely Malaysian situations presented in these stories.

There is a distinct local flavour in the vivid descriptions of people, food, events as the author stops to linger on the concrete variety of Malaysian life. The author situates his motley group of characters in settings which are peculiar to the Malaysian context. It is these characters' endearing quirks and idiosyncrasies which are the chief source of the stories' hilarity.

The stories themselves are entertaining in that they run a gamut of situations and moods. However, while some narratives illuminate, some do not. We sense that the writer is publicly and socially oriented and is trying to address serious issues but he is not wholly successful.

He does try to probe beneath the social mask but do not dig deep enough into the fold sand creases of the Malaysian mind. Though Syed Adam handles his characters with fluency and humour, we are only offered brief snatches of human nature and behaviour. His characters lack depth and are remarkably fragmentary. Some stories suffer from predictability and when endings should shock, they do not. The last three stories especially are rather tame.

Yet despite the lapses in characterisation and plot, there is the undeniable sense of a community in danger of losing sight of itself and the need for man to carve a more meaningful existence for himself.

RECORD OF RICH CULTURE LACKS PITH

The Babas Revisited
by Felix Chia

Pub: Heinemann Asia
No. of Pages: 192

Review by Susan Philip
10 December 1994 *New Straits Times*

The Babas are a fascinating group of people. They look Chinese, but their culture is a happy amalgam of practically every other culture in this country, creating something unique, vibrant and beautiful. Perhaps they, more than any other culture, deserve to be called Malaysian (or Singaporean), representing as they do elements of the whole nation.

As author Chia (himself a Baba) keeps pointing out, their origins are a mystery, no one being quite sure how this curious merging of cultures, languages, and perhaps blood, came about. I say perhaps because there is no proof of the mixing of blood, and to suggest that it did happen apparently is to ruffle many feathers.

Unfortunately, because of this lack of evidence as to their origins, allied with the inevitable cultural erosion wrought by time, the Baba lifestyle seems to be dying out. Chia wrote this book with the intention of recording what he knows of Baba history and customs for posterity.

It is an admirable attempt; a culture as rich as this deserves to be remembered, at least. It is only a pity that the actual recording of the culture is not as rich as the culture itself.

Chia divides his book into chapters dealing with language, education, domestic and social life, celebrations, festivals, games, etc. In each chapter, he tries to give us some insight into what is unique about the culture. Some of the insights are fascinating, especially the details of wedding celebrations or funeral rites. The pomp and circumstance, the elaborate ceremony, the tiny nuances of meaning that a simple gesture or word can carry - all are interesting and well-detailed.

But the quality of Chia's work is uneven. The section on letter writing would have benefited from some judicious trimming, and his point about the use of Baba Malay mixed with English could have been made more quickly. It was also hardly necessary to explain the background of each letter; the author could perhaps have used the opportunity to explore the Baba character. In a couple of instances he starts to, but doesn't take it far enough, and without that extra dimension, that section becomes just a series of explicated letters.

The same could be said of the section on Baba Malay. We are told that the Babas often drop the `h' or change a `u' to an `o' in Malay words, making them recognisably Baba. Having been told this in the introduction to the section, do we then need to be told again that `Abuk' becomes `Abok' because of the "Baba's aversion to `u'"? `Hijau' becomes `Ijo' - the gloss added by Chia tells us informatively that "The `h' is left out and the `u' changed to `o'".

Chia is rightly proud of his ancestry and culture, and his recollections of those aspects of dress, manners, food, etc, that are strictly Baba are generally worthwhile. But he sometimes goes overboard in attributing certain things to the Baba culture. In the chapter on games, for example, he claims that one of "the more imaginative games played by Baba children "was *masak-masak*, or cooking." I'm sure Baba children did (and do) play *masak-masak*; but so did (and does) practically every other child in the world.

Chia's phrasing, and his inclusion of the game in a book specifically about the Babas, suggests that it was invented by Baba children. This may not have been his intention, but in that case, rephrasing his pronouncements would have helped. If he did not intend to claim *masak-masak* as a Baba creation, then this serves only to reinforce the impression I have formed that this book has been carelessly written and carelessly edited.

Chia's expression is often unclear, and sometimes painfully unidiomatic. He states, for example, when discussing marriage customs, that "such a proposed union was a gift in the horse's mouth"! The idiom is twisted and tortured, and it leaves the reader bemusedly wondering who the horse is. Another rather glaring example that really *should* have been picked up is this: "Let the Baba and his uniquity die with dignity." Uniqueness? Iniquity? What?

You could dismiss these as minor quibbles. If the book is interesting and informative, the reader can let such examples slide, even if they do grate on the nerves somewhat. But there is something else that made this book a rather irritating read for me - its shallowness, its generalisations, and its sometimes judgmental tone.

Chia is given to spouting two-bit philosophies that really have nothing to do with the subject under discussion, providing neither illumination nor insight. For example, he talks about his usually mild-mannered grandfather whipping his rickshaw puller, then states with great seriousness of tone that "I believe that under pressure, even the best of us would crack up and lose our temper." Is this explanation necessary? Isn't this just a situation most of us would recognise, even today - a servant being punished by a master?

More galling is the self-righteous, judgmental voice he uses to reprimand those he feels are bastardising or jeopardising the Baba heritage. There is, for example, a furious tirade against

> dealers (who) are quite incapable of appreciating [Baba antiques], being materialists without understanding who gloat over the thought which translates ancient objects only in terms of dollars and cents. Equally superficial are those who are wealthy enough to clamour for such antiques, writing out cheques for large amounts only because they seem to think that, by doing so, their living-rooms would be filled with the air of heritage and culture which the antiques bring forth, although most of them could not possibly be inspired by the intrinsic value of such things.

What has the antique-loving public done to deserve this? Are antique-dealers supposed to turn down the chance of making money by doing their jobs, just because the piece in question is a Baba heirloom? How does Chia come to the conclusion that all non-Babas who buy Baba antiques are superficial culture-vultures with too much money and no sensitivity? Are we not allowed to appreciate these undeniably beautiful artefacts which have, after

all, been put up for sale? Chia's tone alienated me when I read this, and took away a great deal of the enjoyment I might otherwise have had in finishing the book.

On a slightly lighter note, we have Chia predicting the future of the Babas. He concludes that there is no future, because the number of Babas (`pure' ones, anyway) is decreasing year by year, what with marriages outside the community and so on. "The Babas who marry Nyonyas today," he declares, "do so more out of love than for the propagation of Babas and Nyonyas." Does he disapprove of this? Can they only marry with a view to propagate? Again this might not be exactly what Chia means; unfortunately, that is what he says.

The blurb on the back cover calls this "a witty, frank and lively exposition of the dynamics of the Baba's way of life." I'll go along with the description "lively" - Chia's style is not dry and academic; very often, his use of personal recollections helps enliven the descriptions more than quotes from other sources would. I suppose you could call it frank too - he certainly doesn't restrain himself when expressing scurrilous opinions of antique-hunters. But witty? Not really. The wittiest line in this book is a quote from another Baba describing someone who always seems to be eating - "makan tak comma tak full stop". Chia's style would have benefited from some of that pithy expressiveness.

The first edition of this book won the Highly Commended Award for English non-fiction from the National Book Development Council of Singapore in 1982. Perhaps it should be commended for what it attempts to do in preserving a dying heritage. On all other counts, however, the book does not measure up

TRANSCENDENT PHOENIX: A REVIEW OF SIX SINGAPOREAN PLAYS

Playful Phoenix: Women Write for the Singapore Stage
edited by Chin Woon Ping

Review by Susan Philip
(new review)

Singapore enjoys active, state-sanctioned encouragement for young writers, and this has resulted in the production of many creative works of quite remarkable quality. This, combined with an upsurge in the number of theatre companies, has led to something of a playwriting boom. Theatre groups such as The Necessary Stage and TheatreWorks have served as 'new-playwright incubators', with education programs, writers' labs, and writer-in-residence programs.

All this nurturing of local talent has led to the publication of a volume called *Playful Phoenix: Women Write for the Singapore Stage,* an anthology of six recent plays. The book is published by TheatreWorks (S) Ltd., a leading Singapore theatre company, with sponsorship from Singapore Press Holdings.

In her introduction to the volume, editor Chin Woon Ping posits a specific post-colonial, feminist framework for these plays:

> Written in English for an English-speaking audience, the plays grapple with the limitations and resources of English-language theatre (ranging from its Anglo-

> American sources to emergent international forms) by attempting to deconstruct and infuse it with local, multicultural, multidialectical idioms and forms. They join a growing body of Anglophone Southeast Asian theatrical works struggling to cultivate a local identity and audience. At the same time, in their focus on women's identity and agency, they break new ground by highlighting the complex dynamics of gender, family and sexuality.

I would certainly agree with Chin that some of the plays in this anthology are consciously "Singaporean" or "local" in identity; but these writers have passed the stage of attempting; they have *achieved*. And there is no struggle evident in their deconstruction of the English language; they have gracefully and unselfconsciously written in a literate, harmonious, often poetic style that is frequently recognisably Singaporean; it is obviously not British or American. They have achieved this with no stridency, no reaching after effects, none of the insistent, awkward imposition of colloquialisms that makes some of the plays written in the 70s so stiff and unnatural. On the whole the plays in this anthology are well-written and innovative, with a fine sense of the dramatic; one or two are excellent--challenging, intellectual pieces that yet remain gripping and absorbing works of drama.

The most accomplished piece is Ovidia Yu's *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill,* which won the Festival First Award at the 1993 Edinburgh Arts Festival. It is a short piece, fluid and compelling, dealing (as the title suggests) with a woman who sits in a tree on a hill. The woman (referred to throughout as `Woman'), starts off as Noah's wife, and then switches frequently between two other roles, i.e. Nu Wa ("the goddess of

marriage and the patroness of matchmakers" (15)) and Nora (a bewildered and betrayed 20th century wife).

There is no attempt to reflect any kind of physical realism: Yu's stage directions demand that the Woman sit on a tree throughout the performance, "preferably a highly stylized tree" (7). The bareness of the stage and the stylization of the tree liberate Yu from having to adhere to a rigid chronological structure; the neutrality of the set allows her to create characters who flow unhampered from era to era, out of one role and into another. Because Yu has discarded conventional dramatic structures, she has managed to create a seamless narrative that links the antedeluvian to the modern, Judaeo-Christian belief to Chinese mythology. Against this vast and far-ranging backdrop, she examines the position of women, especially in relation to men and marriage.

Women, she suggests are a put-upon and long-suffering lot. Not a very original idea, but her expression of it is lively and interesting. Yu suggests that one of the central differences is that women must deal with the muck and muddle of everyday life, and this is pithily expressed through the different speech patterns of Noah and his wife. Noah's wife is irrepressibly contemporary, down-to-earth, practical; Noah, on the other hand, is unshakably Biblical in speech (the King James version, at that). His every utterance is prefaced by a call of "Wife, Wife", followed either by a query or an instruction. Noah's wife's speech is lively and colourful (speaking of slaughtering an animal, she says "it's me that's going to have to clonk it on its pretty head"), while Noah's speech, chock full of 'thees' and 'thous', is stilted, unreal.

Noah's wife does all the messy work--hanging out the laundry, keeping track of the progress of the animals,

slaughtering, butchering, and cooking the male unicorn when the mountain lions escape and kill the female unicorn (a gruesome yet comical reminder that without the female of the species, the male is not going to get very far).

When the bird that Noah has sent out to search for land finally comes back, it is Noah's wife who notices its exhaustion and commiserates with it: "Poor Birdie, how tired you are. Your little wings are shaking, you can hardly stand. I wish the old man wouldn't keep sending you out, poor Birdie..." (8). The exhaustion of the bird surely mirrors her own exhaustion; indeed, as the Narrator then states, "it has always been a Woman's lot to be weary and to comfort the weary" (8-9). Sadly, though weary, they themselves never receive comfort.

The dramatist's emphasis on the trivia of daily life, rather than on the 'monumental', 'epic' business of building the Ark and stocking it with animals, helps to foreground the plight of exhausted women everywhere who "cleaned, cooked, minded the animals and held up half the sky but were written out of the history books" (Introduction). Here, Yu gives prominence to their everyday chores, giving dignity to the hard labour they do that is too often dismissed lightly. She endows woman with dignity by acknowledging and highlighting the vital importance of the 'woman's' work that must go on behind the scenes, if man's dreams are ever to be accomplished. Men may dream, but they must also eat, and it is the women of this world who see that these basic needs are met.

Despite the underlying seriousness of her ideas, Yu's touch remains light and deft. She does not preach. Rather, she gives Noah's wife strength and dignity by the simple expedient of making her a real, believable, sympathetic woman who, in the

midst of her own exhaustion, can feel for the plight of a bird. She is not superwoman, nor is she a shrew; she is a wife who tries to do what she perceives to be her duty.

From this tough Biblical survivor, Yu segues to the 20th century, introducing us to Nora, another perennially tired wife, tied this time to a complaining, philandering oaf of a husband. Paul (the husband) verbally batters Nora into a state of bewildered confusion. Though she is the perfect attentive wife, Paul manages to twist and manipulate words so that Nora is always at fault. In the scene in which Nora and Paul are introduced, Yu allows us no breathing space. Paul pours out his tirade without let, drowning Nora in a flood of baseless accusations.

Yet finally, Nora does not go mad or kill herself or take any other drastic way out of this untenable situation. Rather, she just climbs a tree and sits there "serenely..., looking off into the distance" (13). The Woman states that "[a] woman climbs a tree to get away" from "dogs, floods, mud...*men*..." (28). The tree represents escape--not away from the world, per se, but into a personal space that allows them to exist as individual beings who are not mired in the swamp of everyday existence. Within that personal space, away from the demands of men, women can see possibilities for themselves. The Woman goes on to narrate stories of ordinary women who climbed trees, and then went on to do extraordinary, fulfilling things. The tree becomes a metaphor for escape from the drudgery of life within a male-dominated world. It also comes to function as a symbol of a shared, woman-centred space. For example, Paul's mistress Maureen appears at the foot of Nora's tree, needing space away from Paul, and she is welcomed by Nora (the woman who has, according to convention, been wronged by Paul and Maureen).

By placing all her archetypal women in the tree, Yu links them into one great sisterhood who "need to know that they can stretch out into the sky while keeping their roots in the ground" (34). While Virginia Woolf recognised the need for a room of one's own, Yu suggests that a tree of one's own (rooted in the earth, but still able to transcend the ordinary) is vital to a woman's development.

Finally the (male) narrator asks rather enviously if he can join the Woman in her tree, but she refuses. Instead she tells him "Plant your own future. Trees grow. If you let them" (36). There is space in the tree for Maureen, but not for the narrator. Men have to learn to make their own space.

Yu's play is vibrant and energetic, and she deftly handles a wide variety of diverse voices. She keeps tight control over her characters, even though they are required to 'shift personality' frequently, sometimes within the same speech. It is also remarkable that she has managed to encompass such a large subject within such a small, tight framework, without diminishing or trivialising it.

The Woman in a Tree on the Hill is not grounded in the idiom and locale of Singapore--setting, speech, characterisation are all fairly neutral. Furthermore, the inclusion of both Christian and Chinese myths, as well as of the twentieth century couple, serves to broaden the scope of the play beyond a specific locale or culture. However, the theme that Yu has highlighted (marriage, the man-woman relationship) appears to be of central concern to the other playwrights in this anthology as well.

Given the pressure that a patriarchal society exerts on its women to marry and be subservient to their husbands, marriage

will of course be a central issue for women the world over. But in Singapore the issue is highlighted even more because over and above the normal societal pressure, there is also pressure from the government. And the governmental pressure demands not only that women marry, but also that they procreate. In a country that emphasises education, development, progress, women are receiving the conflicting message that their ultimate worth is as seed bearers. No wonder, then, that the women in this anthology question what marriage is, what it can do for them, why strict adherence to societal norms is so important.

The second play is *Ordinary Woman* by Dana Lam, who expresses the hope that "her plays and other creative efforts are exploratory of the human condition" (39). This play also eschews surface realism in favour of a bare, stark, symbolic set. The characters are three nameless women (called Woman 1, Woman 2, and Woman 3), strangers to each other, who are waiting for a bus on a dark and lonely road. Unfortunately, the bus stop is on the opposite side of the road, and the road has caved in, leaving a huge gap between them and the bus stop.

As they wait for the bus, the women narrate their lives, and the circumstances that have brought them to this bus stop in the middle of the night. They build up a picture of themselves, as daughters, wives, mothers; all three experience a similar sensation of having missed something, of having waited for a long time, with nothing to show for it:

> WOMAN 3: I looked and looked and saw nothing. Nothing, I said out loud. Nothing.
>
> WOMAN 1: From where I was looking, there was no end to it.

(Small light on WOMAN 2

WOMAN 2: I came to a point where it caved in. Slowly but surely it caved in-just like this.

WOMAN 1: You never actually see it *(Small pause)* until it's too late to see.

WOMAN 3: It's always around the corner where you don't see it but know it's there. So you wait, whether or not you want to.

WOMAN 2: I waited a long time; a really long time.

WOMAN 1: I thought if I waited any longer, I would miss it.

WOMAN 3: I waited; and I watched it waiting for me waiting.

(41-42)

The play maintains this bleak, elegiac tone throughout, as the women narrate stories of loss and unfulfillment.

The set includes a string of sagging, flickering Chinese paper lanterns, which at various intervals the women try to light, only to have the flames blown out by the wind. The image of lights snuffed out, or lights not seen, is central to the women's vision of their lives. Woman 3, for example, is distressed because it is full moon night, but "there's no moon tonight" (53). She has looked and looked but "I saw nothing. Nothing. Nothing, I said to myself. Nothing, *nothing, I* said out loud" (53). Woman 2 has never seen a sunrise: "The sun had risen without

my seeing it. My neck ached for being tilted so long at the sky" (61).

Light seems to symbolise what life could be. Woman 3, when describing the promises made to her by men, includes sunsets: "Come with me. I'll show you things. Sunsets. Roof over your head. A car. Important things. Somewhere to belong. Someone to hold" (60). Marriage, society tells her, will give her "somewhere to belong", a life of sunsets and possibilities. And yet for all three women, the light seems to go out after marriage. Woman 3 asks, plaintively, "Will there be another sunrise?" (60).

One of the more interesting and original images is voiced by Woman 1, who fell in love with a man, and felt that he "took [her] breath away" (66). While this is a conventional expression of love, Lam extends the image to suggest that Woman 1 has given her very existence, her breath, to this man. She states later that she has drowned in him. Falling in love with him, she has subordinated her entire being to his. When she seeks to regain that being, he rejects her: "Let me through, I said, and he let me go" (60).

All three women have been pushed to escape, to run away from stricture, from loss of self. But having run, they do not know where to go or how to get there. They have come to this bus stop because they want to go somewhere, to get away from where they are, but having come this far, they are stymied. Their courage falters. Do they dare go on? Does the bus still come to this bus stop? Can they get across the gap in the road? In fact, they are too afraid to try. Only Woman 3 tries--and she ends up inside the gap, only to climb out again, back to her companions. They hear the bus once, but it does not come into view. They have taken the first big step in trying to free themselves, but a

question remains as to how far they will achieve liberation. Lam does not answer the question. The final image is of the women trying once again to light the lanterns. Lam suggests, in this image, that perhaps all they can do is try and salvage the light that they had always missed before.

Lam's dramatic touch is not as sure as Yu's, but the gentle, somewhat mournful tone perfectly captures the lost, bewildered mood of the three women. They have run from something vague but threatening, and are running, without any plan, towards something vague.

Also commendable is her use of these three characters in multiple roles. They are Woman 1, 2, and 3, but they also play each other's mothers or daughters, foregrounding again a kind of commonality or community among women.

Lam's play is not entirely locale or culture specific, though some of the cultural references are specifically Chinese: for example, the description of a wake, where mourners are served "[t]ea and noodles, and tetrapak soya-milk. And peanuts, of course. And sweets--tiny drops of lemon yellow and lime green in cellophane to sweeten the hereafter" (45); there are also snatches of dialogue which Lam states should be "delivered in the Cantonese dialect" (53). Though the play has resonance within the Singapore community, it also reaches further, to a wider spectrum of womanhood.

Eleanor Wong's *Wills and Secession* is much more specific to Singapore; in this play Wong takes issue with society's understanding of the concepts of 'family' and 'spouse'. Singapore, though apparently dynamic, forward-looking and progressive, remains at heart a conservative society, with a

narrow understanding of what constitutes a family, and what the duties of a spouse are. Wong challenges conventional understanding by presenting the story of Grace and Ellen Toh, sisters who journey down a road towards greater awareness of each other.

Grace is a pastor's wife, settled in Singapore, looking after her parents. Ellen is a high-flying lawyer, working in London. It is eventually revealed to us that she was married, is divorced (she has a child from that marriage), and is now happy with her lover Lesley. Ellen feels that it is her lesbianism that is at the root of all her problems with her family.

The confrontation between the two sisters comes about because Grace has to pack up and follow her husband to Surabaya, to start a mission there. She wants Ellen to come back from London to look after their father. Ellen is furious because she is expected to leave Lesley behind with no regrets; Lesley and Ellen, though completely committed to each other, are not accorded the dignity of spousal status, because they are both women. Yet it seems clear that as a marriage, their relationship is more of an equal partnership than that of Grace and her husband. Grace is still defined (confined?) by the traditional conception of wife as helpmeet, or in other words supporter and general dogsbody. Eventually, Grace learns to value and respect the love between Lesley and Ellen, as well as to question the subordinate status she occupies in her marriage. Indeed, she is accorded so little consideration that her husband does not even tell her about the Surabaya mission: she learns about it from the church newsletter.

Wong's characterisation initially seems a little flat: Ellen is the angry, fiery rebel, Grace is the gentle, accepting

peacemaker. However it soon becomes clear that these are masks. Ellen hides the depth of her feeling behind a facade of flippancy, while Grace's meekness disguises considerable strength of will. Ellen is fast-talking, quick-witted, sharp-tongued; but she is capable of expressing her love for Lesley in simple and moving terms: "You. Are the most beautiful person in the whole world to me. And I love you very very much" (140). Wong handles the depiction of Lesley and Ellen's relationship without coyness or embarrassment. She is forthright in forcing us to consider all the implications of being in a family that is not officially accorded the status of family.

Structurally, *Wills and Secession* is reminiscent of the plays of Caryl Churchill. Wong has written an episodic-play, without the conventional linear progression; this structure allows her to concentrate on the development of the relationships between the three women, rather than on the storyline.

The final resolution (unfortunately, I feel) avoids complications by having Lesley die of cancer. Her illness brings Grace and Ellen close again: caring for Lesley, Ellen finally sees what Grace had to go through when she nursed their mother (who died of liver cancer); while Grace, watching Ellen's devotion to Lesley, finally understands that love need not be confined to socially constructed and accepted patterns. Everything is tied up neatly when Grace delivers a eulogy in which she states both her incomprehension and acceptance of the love between Lesley and Ellen:

> I do not know what the statistics or research show about why some of us are gay and the rest are not. Some people call it a thorn in the flesh or a burden or a cross. I don't know. Or against God's will. I honestly don't know. But I

> do know love when I see it. After I got to know Lesley, I came to see that her love for my sister is as deep and strong and true as any love I have ever known. (157)

The play ends with a plea for love, understanding and respect. And in our fantasies perhaps we can dream that this plea is given credence. But what is still needed, perhaps, is a play which addresses what happens next. Ellen has decided to live in a basically conservative society. How will she cope? It is probably too much to expect Wong to tackle that question within the confines of this play; perhaps the first and most vital order of business is to put the question out in public, as she has done.

The first three plays in the anthology treat marriage as confinement, stripping the woman of independence and individuality. Leow Puay Tin's play *Family* is an interesting reversal of that stance. She writes of the women of the Yang family, headed by a strong and powerful matriarch. Yu, Lam and Wong portray modern, late 20th century women as being trapped. Leow, however, focusses on a child-bride from China in the earlier part of this century, who remains an individual, powerful in her own right.

As a preface to the play, Leow quotes from the *I Ching,* which states that "[w]ithin the family a strong authority is needed. This is vested in the parents. But the tie that holds the family together is the loyalty and perseverance of the wife" (169). Indeed, in this play, Mrs. Yang is the centre of the family, the nucleus around which it clings tenaciously. Hers is a family dominated by women, as one by one her menfolk die.

Leow takes us from the 1950s, with Mrs. Yang narrating her life story, to the 1990s, when Mrs. Yang's coffee-shop has

burgeoned into a business empire. The entire business is founded on Mrs. Yang's strength and business acumen, and also on the strong bond of family that exists between the matriarch, her daughter, and her daughters-in-law.

As in Wong's play, there is a questioning of exactly what constitutes a family: the Yang family is not built on the traditional structure with both parents at the head. Rather, it is a matriarchy in a patriarchal society. The potential patriarchs are all dead or crippled. The daughters-in-law of this family are like Ruths following their Naomi; but unlike Ruth, they do not marry Boaz. Offered the chance to remarry, Mrs. Yang's daughters-in-law refuse, stressing their loyalty to their family:

> LI SOH: Oh, you are cruel! You know I am no longer young! I am already past 30. I have given my youth to this family. Have I become useless now that my husband is dead?
>
> MRS. YANG: No, no, no. I want all of you to be free ! Many years ago, I asked your Tua Soh not to remarry, to follow me, but now I dare not ask all of you to do the same.
>
> LI SOH: I have four sons and two daughters, and their surname is Yew. I am their mother.
>
> SAH SOH: You think we are weaker than Tua Soh? (200 - 201)

It is this strength and the strong sense of family unity that engender the success of the Yang family.

But while Leow celebrates that strength, she also makes it clear that female strength is feared and despised in society. To look once again at the quote from the *I Ching*, while the mother functions as the spiritual centre of the family, society demands that family authority be vested in both parents. It defies logic and convention for that authority to come solely from the mother. Mrs. Yang, therefore, is not lauded for her perseverance, her shrewdness, her fortitude. Rather, she is blamed for 'killing' her husband and sons, because she was born in the year of the tiger. As she heads towards death, she is confronted by female voices calling her "Usurper", "Castrator", "Unnatural woman" (261). In despair, she voices out the dilemma of the strong woman in a society which looks upon female strength as suspicious and unnatural:

> MRS. YANG: Ah, Father! Mother! Why was I born a woman! I should have been a man! Then they will not accuse me! My husband would have been my wife, and I would have been a father to my children. Then all that I had done would be right in the eyes of heaven and men. (262)

She screams against the injustice of being trapped in hell for being "an unnatural woman"; she asks, reasonably, "If I had been unwise/ And less than good/ Tell me, who would/ Have fed my brood?" (265).

In this chronicle of the Yang women, Leow foregrounds the injustice and inhumanity of the patriarchal view of women forced by circumstances to survive, and then reviled for not only surviving but succeeding--without male help. This is a complex and multi-dimensional play in which Leow easily melds dream and reality, past and present. Her characterisation is deft; the

characters are archetypal rather than individual, drawn in with a few strong and confident lines, but not encumbered with detail and ornamentation.

While the play is obviously set in Singapore, its thematic references hold much wider currency. Mrs. Yang's plight reflects the plight of women in many cultures; and the situation of the Yang children, caught between tradition and the Western influence of the colonising missionaries, is familiar to practically all former colonies.

Perhaps the least satisfactory play in the collection is Tan Mei Ching's *Quiet the Gorilla,* a frenetic look at the relationship between two sisters, Siew and Min. This play recalls Wong's *Wills and Secession* in that the central characters are sisters driven apart by family tensions as well as the spatial and cultural differences created by one of them going to Boston to study.

Siew is the sister who has stayed in Singapore, who remains in constant touch with her parents; Min is the flighty, irresponsible one for whom the parents long, dismissing Siew's filial piety with little thought. They see Siew as a kind of bridge between themselves and Min; as Siew puts it, she is "a bridge connecting two shores. They repair me so they can walk on me better" (330).

Everyone seems to feel free to "walk on" Siew. As soon as she comes home, tired and wanting a shower, she is assaulted by a friend having marital problems, a stray cat, an obscene phonecaller, and Min (who should be at school in Boston). Later, the nosy neighbour Mrs. Lee joins the menagerie. To all these demands on her time and energy, Siew responds with remarkable

restraint, patience, even grace. She is a sympathetic character, gentle and believable.

Min, on the other hand, is spoilt and unlikeable. She has run away from college because she is pregnant, and does not know what to do. She escapes to the capable, responsible bosom of her sister, wanting someone else to take over the problem. Min is thoughtless, by turns sullen and flippant, and she is rude to Mrs. Lee.

The two sisters have little in common, and do not appear to like each other much. Min finds Siew too pliable (though she is not averse to taking advantage of that pliability herself), while Siew thinks Min is irritating and painful "I don't know why Mom and Dad want to hear from you," she says. "It's like wanting ear-ache" (311). In spite of this basic lack of sympathy and understanding between them, they cannot disown each other; they are sisters:

> SIEW: I didn't say that. I'm just wondering how you and your life can be mixed up with me and my life.
>
> MIN: We can *unmix* them right away.
>
> SIEW: That's the funny thing--we can't. It's supposed to be in the blood. If you can *unmix* them, why didn't you just appear on the doorstep of you school friends or something? Why come here? (312-313)

Finally, Siew and Min do manage to embrace, though without really resolving the issues between them. They are family, and that fact can neither be ignored nor altered, no matter how dissonant the characters of the family members are. The

strength of Tan's play is that she acknowledges this ambiguity in family relationships, without reaching after any mawkish reconciliations.

In fact, her view of families in general seems bleak. Mrs. Lee (at first glance a rather stereotypical busybody next door) is stuck with a 'comatose' husband and two daughters who do not come to visit. Later we realise that Mrs. Lee has no children, and she is trying to fill the vacuum by 'inventing' two daughters, as well as by treating Siew as a surrogate daughter. Her marriage has left her with nothing; married, but without the patriarchally-constructed validation of motherhood, her life is empty. But we also have to question whether having children would have validated her, made her any happier or more fulfilled. Would there not be an equal chance that she might have ended up with a family like Siew's? By concentrating on these scarred and wounded characters, Tan questions not only the concept of family, but also (though she acknowledges the inescapability of family ties) the weight placed on it by society.

Of course, since the two main characters are single women, the question of marriage must be addressed. In this play, it takes the form of Siew being hounded by her married friend and by Mrs. Lee to meet a variety of nice young men whom they know. But again Tan's bleak vision takes over. Siew is reluctant to take even the first step of meeting someone; and who can blame her, when she is surrounded by such unconvincing examples of marriage as Mrs. Lee and her husband (fast asleep in front of the TV), and her friend Jean who seems to be involved in one long spat with her new husband. Tan's play is not entirely pessimistic, but the dark tones do tend to overwhelm the lighter tones.

What mars Tan's play is the introduction of a gorilla, an escapee from one of Siew's dreams, which appears at odd intervals to the three women. While explaining her dream, Siew suggests that the gorilla might just be driven mad by the constant noise that assaults it; in which case, it could be symbolic of all the societal demands that are bearing down on Siew, robbing her of peace and quiet. But Tan has not integrated the symbol into her narrative; the appearance of the gorilla is jarring in an otherwise fairly realistic play. And the reactions of the women to the gorilla are odd, disjointed, unconvincing, simply because an atmosphere in which such surrealism could be accepted has not been built up. The play would certainly not have suffered with the removal of this symbol.

The last play in this anthology is Chin Woon Ping's *Diary of a Madwoman*, an interesting, innovative, experimental work which leaps and skips about, embracing the fantastic in much the same way that the madwoman's mind does. This play takes as its central premise the feminist idea of the male gaze; it is the gaze that sends the madwoman over the edge.

In her diary, the madwoman writes that she feels she is being "taped"; her nephew reads it as "raped". A short while later the meaning of the word changes-initially associating it with videocameras, the madwoman expands her understanding of the word (as well as ours) to include the idea of bound feet being taped, and women being conquered. Being 'taped', being gazed at, being conquered, being raped--all run together in the madwoman's mind as a statement, a metaphor, of what men do with women:

> MADWOMAN: And what will they do with the tape? They will look and look to their hearts' content with their

> penetrating eyes without having me look back at them. I will be locked forever in their terrorizing gaze, and I will not be able to look back at them. They will feast on the image of my body and devour it. (371)

The penetrating male gaze focusses on women solely as bodies, but the madwoman is aware of another, entirely different, level of existence that has nothing to do with the body:

> MADWOMAN: What they don't know is that sometimes the woman part of me just oozes away, until I am just a lizard mind, a bundle of nerves, a pack of cells, a network of urges and fears. No, they don't see that at all.
>
> What they see is my skin--my irridescent skin. What they want is to tape it and own it and do with it what they want, to sell their cars and hot dogs and be theirs to own. (370)

The madwoman feels that she must "warn [her] sisters...about this conspiracy" (372), which is what she manages to do through her diary.

We initially see the madwoman's niece reading the diary: the diary entries are acted out by another person. But as the niece begins to understand and sympathise with her aunt, she takes over the role herself, symbolically entering into a full awareness of the madwoman's fears. Sadly, she only manages to touch her niece; the others remain pitying, scornful, unsympathetic, uncomprehending.

The madwoman also rails against the pressure of life in modern society, expressing it as a sense of being oppressed by

tall buildings, overcrowding, pollution; there is a crushing sense of being bound (taped). Chin dramatizes this in a wonderful scene which involves the madwoman driving along the highway at high speed, stopping on the way to pick up a hitchhiking cat and iguana. There is a sense of openness and freedom, of real enjoyment, which is quickly overcome by "pedestrians... buses...lorries...cement mixers, big monsters... what's that little sign ahead...what's it say? Speed camera ahead" (375). Quickly and dramatically, the woman's sense of freedom is crushed by the existence of society and all its choking impediments.

The strength of Chin's play lies in its bravely experimental nature. The playwright allows her imagination and creativity free reign, and the result is lively and marvellously anarchic, the very freedom of the play functioning as an indictment of the rigidity of society. The device of the diary allows us to look into the madwoman's mind; indeed the whole play seems structured to reflect the madwoman's mind--things seem chaotic, illogical, unhinged even, but through it all runs a very strong thread of sense. Chin takes full advantage of drama, dance, music, and film techniques to demonstrate, rather than discuss, the teeming confusion experienced by the woman.

Yet finally, in spite of this confusion (or perhaps because she has acknowledged the confusion) she manages to come to some sort of awareness or resolution of who she is, as evidenced by her gleeful video-taped final message. It does seem a little ironic, though, that in order to leave this message she must do what she accuses society of doing--she has to tape herself.

What links this play with the others in the anthology is the sense that women in any typical social context are destined to be 'taped': whether as wives, sisters, daughters, or as members of

society, there is a sense of oppression. Wives are expected to conform, and they become trapped in the restraints of societal values and expectations. But there is optimism in that these restraints are acknowledged. This generation of writers knows what they are up against, and through their vibrant, dynamic writing, are bravely breaking the bounds.

PRISONER OF THE JAPANESE

From Changi to Tokyo
by Tom Henling Wade

Pub: Kangaroo Press
No. of pages: 186

Diary of a Girl in Changi 1941-1945
by Sheila Allan

Pub: Kangaroo Press
No. of pages: 168

Review by Susan Philip
22 October 1994 *New Straits Times*

There seems to be a sudden upsurge of interest in World War Two nowadays, triggered off, perhaps, by the 50th anniversary of D-Day and the Normandy beach landings.

The Western side has given us Spielberg's *Schindler's List* as well as an increased awareness of the heroic efforts of Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara who while serving in Lithuania managed to save many Jews by giving them visas to Japan.

Ironically, while that Japanese hero is being celebrated in the West, on this side of the globe, memories of the Japanese during the war years are not so laudatory.

The Kangaroo Press of Australia has published the stories of two survivors of Japanese prison camps in Changi and Japan. One written by a young British Army man and the other by a sheltered, convent-educated, 17-year-old Eurasian girl, they provide interestingly diverse viewpoints of internment under the Japanese.

Sheila Allan (considered Australian because of her Australian father) was interned with her father, stepmother, and other Europeans, first in Changi prison, then in Sime Road Camp. She kept the diary, which she points out was "a dangerous undertaking" with potentially "horrendous" consequences, because that was the only way she could keep her sanity.

The diary does bear the marks of having been written surreptitiously and often hurriedly. It is, frankly, not well written, but I would hesitate to criticise it on those grounds. The writer was very young, naive, and living under constant stress and fear of violence, not to mention tremendous physical deprivation. The style bears the mark of her youth, and the difficult conditions under which she had to write. Indeed, that she wrote it at all speaks of considerable courage and resourcefulness, and for a publication of this nature, that is perhaps what we should bear in mind.

The diary does not make for riveting reading, but it is interesting as a chronicle of life in an internment camp and as a sort of testament to the toughness and determination to survive of the internees. We can also see, from the changing quality of the writing and the observations made, that the diarist matured considerably by the time she was liberated.

Her first entries are gushing, sentimental, overly poetic, and striving too hard for symbolism and profundity, for example, musing on a bunch of flowers she picked on the morning that was declared she writes: "Those flowers - some of them only buds, died before serving their time. I had killed them; not thinkingly, but it seemed symbolic of what war is.:

Four years later, she has more or less overcome this tendency to philosophise; instead, she starts to just record her feelings, much more simply and matter-of-factly. These entries, though still attesting her youth and innocence, strike me as being truer; they are more open and honest and less posed.

Allan must be commended for not trying to overdramatise her part and turning herself into a heroine. As she says in the introduction: "if readers expect to read about shocking brutality and rapes then they'll be disappointed".

She simply records daily events as faithfully as she can, and rather than dwelling on the cruelty that the internees certainly must have suffered, she prefers to concentrate on the heroism and fortitude of these ordinary people, and the spirit of comradeship (marred occasionally by camp politics) that helped them to survive.

Perhaps because of her youth and innocence, and her understandable ignorance about military tactics Allan is completely uncritical of the British Army and its role in the fall of Singapore. They are the heroes, our gallant boys. This is, we imagine, the typical civilian reaction to the fall, and one that is contradicted in Tom Henling Wades' memoirs of his involvement in the war.

Wade's book is more analytical. He discusses events leading up to the capture of Singapore in critical detail. As a journalist whose family had been based in China for three generations, and who had observed the Japanese take-over of China, Wade questions the steps taken by the British to check their southward expansion.

They knew that the invasion of Malaya would likely come from the north but their main defence were in the south; they made no attempt to learn how to fight in the jungle and assumed (having badly underestimated their opponents) that the Japanese would not know how to handle jungle combat either and they refused to enlist the help of the Malays (who would be more familiar with the terrain and how to survive it) because they had no trust in the very people they governed.

Wade's tone, when he describes these follies, is bitter and somewhat contemptuous.

His book contains a lot of the brutality that is absent in Allan's; as military prisoners, he and his comrades were subject to much harsher treatment than the civilians and women. Wade was also unlucky enough to have a paranoid sadist, Sergeant Matsuhiro Watanabe, in charge of his camp. The vicious and arbitrary nature of the punishments he meted out, and the sheer pointlessness of most of these, is shocking.

But Wade does not make the violence the centre of his book. The daily beatings happened, and he and many other people survived them; beyond that, he does not really dwell on these. His intention seems more to gain insight into the Japanese character.

For Wade, internment seems to have been a learning experience. Like Allan, he celebrates the fortitude of the human spirit, sometimes expressing amazement that so many of them managed to survive on so little. But he is more aware than Allan is of the many failings and inadequacies of the prisoners: he is far less idealistic and romantic than Allan.

He is also a better writer. His tone is cool and detached; the violence therefore, though present, does not overwhelm the reader. The coolness of tone also ensures that Wade never emerges as the hero of the prison camp. He too does not overplay his role.

These accounts of the war in this region are interesting for us, but both are written from the viewpoint of foreigners; Allan, even though she had a Malayan mother and was once slightingly referred to in camp as "that slit-eyed Chink", clearly allies herself with the British, and does not think of herself as local. Wade is British, and only spent a short time in Singapore before being shipped off to Japan.

It might be more interesting for us to have more local memoirs of survival - I can only think of one such book, by Sybil Kathigasu. There may be more; if there are, they could be marketed more vigorously for they would certainly be more immediately relevant and interesting than the memories of former colonialists.

A STRIKING PIECE OF DIASPORIC LITERATURE

The Naturalization of Camellia Song
by Chin Woon Ping

Pub: Times Books International
No. of pages: 120

Review by Margaret Yong
25 August 1993 *New Straits Times*

One night Camellia Song "woke to face/her face mirrored", with the moon through her memories looking "brilliant as a jade disc, fresh as a/Livesaver". Such dreaming leads from "out of the walled tribal place", but towards - what place beyond? or within? It is this journey from the lost (and subsequently recovered) ancestral past to a place of new dreaming which Camellia's Song celebrates. As Camellia watches her face in the mirror of self/of art, she poses a candid question: Is the pat merely a wash of sentiment urging her to "(succumb) to waves of *rindu*"? Camellia Song is not interested in nostalgia except as an aid to reinvigorate memory; as she faces the past, she rejects the posture of the exile who merely "harp(s) upon the special/theme of loss".

As Camellia Song journeys towards the destination which beckons, she in turn naturalises her past; as history dims into fable, she is able to claim a victory over the receding past: "We told stories of the old ways/ And washed them down with new wine". In this way, the journey itself is a process which provides spaces "to sort out some old memories" and, indeed, "to make history happen".

Within this familiar postcolonial frame, Camellia's journeying takes her from Malacca, her earliest private tribal place (with memory anchoring its odours of fruit and sea-sand sensuously recalled, its people mingling lovingly in the sounds of kitchens and cooking, tide and rainfall), to the many terminuses of the wandering soul. These places, evoked in a litany, have become the recuperated centres of the diaspora of the overseas Chinese:

> Shanxi, to South, Rangoon to Singapore.
> Malacca to Perth, Manoa to Mauritius,
> Cologne to Kingston, Philadelphia to Rio ....

These are the shared spaces on a wandering tribe. Camellia Song, then, is not alone in her search for ancestral roots and present rootedness. Many ghosts accompany her, and her odyssey is part of a worldwide translation of dislocated peoples. As she says playfully in a poem whose sadness engraves the theme of transience and departure, people take "scholar/ ships to England and Canada ... People immigrate to/ Australia and America", a veritable sea of emigrants flows through these pages.

As her Song replaces "faded history" with the sources of "memorized springs" which can refresh, Camellia draws into it the vital signs of the Naturalised citizen of the diaspora. Some, like the seven Vietnamese boys in New York whom she observes may even prefer to forget their journeying ... for by their appearance they declare that they have Arrived!

> crossing the road at 46th and Walnut ...
> their skintight jeans and denim jackets

hightops and one tall dude's hair slashed
diagonally with orange dye ....

The Naturalization of Camellia Song belongs to a distinct corpus, the literature of postcolonial diaspora. Because of Chin Woon Ping's particular Chinese-Malaysian-American history (she was born in Malacca, has accumulated in extensive itinerary, and has made her home in Vermont), Camellia Song draws inspiration from a shared compulsion to re-create new versions of identity - and literature has gained in complexities thereby.

That such works strike a chord with Malaysian-Chinese readers is clear from the interest generated by books like Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Lynn Pan's *Sons of the Yellow Emperor* which have become local bestsellers. Like Lynn Pan, Chin Woon Ping transects our awareness vividly. Unlike Lynn Pan who postulates a unifying experience in her subtitle (`The Story of the Overseas Chinese'), she assumes no universal essentialisms in her odyssey.

The Naturalization of Camellia Song interpellates ethnicity and identity in terms of a journey which possibly never ends. But Camellia's Song suggests that that is no cause for lamentation, for its very accretions over time and place enrich/extend/engulf the traveller's hybridities, here rendered colloquially:

what make you think
we stuck in the nineteenth century?
don't stop me from striding
into the twenty-first one.

For this reason, the lurid claim (made on the cover of this edition) that Camellia Song is the "intimate journal of the Chinese woman embracing the world" makes sense. If we overlook its excesses, this advertising blurb plots the shape of the collisions and comminglings which, in all their shapes, form the theme of Camellia's Song:

> What did it mean, that in this far-
> Flung, dry center of a continent
> Our humming aspirations collided ...

This question, subsumed in diasporic literature, has generated some of the most exciting poetry of our time worldwide. *The Naturalization of Camellia Song* brings to this generic quest an energy of vision coupled with a suppleness of language which will make Chin Woon Ping's first collection of poems a notable contender for this year's Commonwealth Poetry Prize.

WORDS TO MASTER EXPERIENCE

The Brink of An Amen
by Lee Tzu Pheng

Pub: Times Books International
No. of pages: 62

Review by Lim Chee Seng
15 May 1991 *New Straits Times*

Lee Tzu Pheng is a fine poet. To say she is a fine Singapore poet is in no way to diminish her achievement but rather to signal her engagement with her context. She gave us that oft-anthologised piece called `My Country and My People' in her first volume, *Prospect of a Drowning* (1980). She is indeed one of Singapore's finest poets writing in English.

The cover of this collection of poems has a collage of Michelangelo's God obscured by the black label of the title - only His creative hand is showing. To those readers who think that Michelangelo was mistaken to have put God and man in the same dimension, this might be seen as an advantage, even an improvement - God behind the Cloud of Unknowing but still the God who listens for the amen that this collection is on the brink of saying.

This is a rather sad collection. The pain of departure is very strong with its attendant discomforts. Yet there is a sense of an arrival. But it is an arrival at a destination to which the poet has yet to adjust fully. Way back in 1980 in a poem called `Everything Is Going Away', she had said it memorably enough:

departure is arrival
at another place,
but there are no charts or provisions.

The poet is further down the road than in her first and second volumes of poems. *Against the Next Wave* (1988) had a prayerful but perplexed moment in its title poem:

I am lost in your ocean,
My feet on the ground,
and what I have found
I do not understand.

There is a sense of the poet having been on the brink of an abyss who now believes herself, as the title of the latest collection proclaims, to be on "the brink of an amen". The volume begins with a poem called `nativity' (Christ's birth) and ends with another entitled `Pieta' (a representation of the crucified Christ on Mary's lap). This is a volume by a Roman Catholic poet and the poem is not a pessimistic closure. There is the promise of and a faith in a resurrection.

There is a small sequence of poems about the craft of poetry in which Lee Tzu Pheng charmingly addresses the reader as a creative comrade.

What words unravel
may be you,
integrating

(`The Fabric')

each word you mint for poetry -
make sure they're worth
at least *your* breath:

(`Free Verse')

One recalls a similar address in *Against the Next Wave*:

Making a poem is
taking charge of yourself,
your fears, incapacities, tears:
being tough, taking yourself
by the scruff ...

(`If You Must Know')

The presence of Gerard Manley Hopkins is clear in *The Brink of An Amen*. He is present as fellow Catholic and poet. The latter is nowhere more obvious than in the poem which gives this collection its title. Hopkins' fondness for "reverse" rhyme is prominently echoed by Lee Tzu Pheng:

a tight band of **pre**sences **pre**ssing in,
claims that **cl**utch at our souls,
to **bl**ot **ou**t the **bl**ight of **our** knowing,
halting **half**-speech.

Hopkins is also recalled in the dark poems of suffering. It is in these poems that the poet is most effective. Many of us suffer like dumb animals, in quiet desperation; the poet suffers in rhyme and verse.

These bitter poems include `Once Upon a Time', which brings back the dark obverse of fairy tales first powerfully stated in `Grimm Story' in *Against the Next Wave*. There is a

determined turning of the back on `fictioning' in the poem and a setting of the face to confront the nothing of reality, to wake up from the fairy-tale dream that is now no longer a preferred alternative to the nothing.

The suspended animation of being "deep within the womb of "sleep" in `Thorn-rose: The Bad Fairy's Version' of *Against the Next Wave* is neither free nor inviolate. `Once Upon a Time' is a wider poem but also a sadder one:

> But the fictioning ends today:
> arriving with nothing
> I stand relieved
> before the fantasies you have
> escaped into.
> And nothing
> will make me follow you.

This volume is not without its moments of humour. `Silence Please' is an amusing poem about poets ranged on library shelves. These poets are the voices which will not keep silent in the institution erected in their honour. The silence requested is presumably for their benefit but will actually kill them all. All poets must be read and read aloud. There is no other way. And it is no good asking them or their readers to keep silent!

I have always been very impressed with the commonsensical challenge of that character in Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counterpoint*, a certain Mr Sita Ram, who laid down his role of thumb about the value of a book: "Sometimes one reads a whole book without finding a single phrase one can remember or quote. What's de good of such a book, I ask you?"

What, indeed, is the good of such a book, and especially, a book of poetry? The readers have a right to expect any poet to be an eloquent being above the common run of word-users.

I have already cited some memorable and quotable phrases and passages which I feel sure will keep Mr Sita Ram happy. There are many delightful things here and in the earlier volumes: "Who would find treasure learns to hold/The gift of tears more dear than pearls" (`Of Great Price'); "the maze/of their self-amazement" (`Once Upon a Time'). Some of her poems are little gems with the brevity and charm of haikus though not their strict form:

> when my soul is most still
> I can hear my thoughts drop
> like pebbles into a pool
> but they find no bed on which to rest
>
> (`Stony End')

Lee Tzu Pheng is the daughter of the distinguished civil servant, the late Tan Sri Lee Siow Mong. The collection is dedicated to his memory. In her second volume, she has conducted a dialogue with her father through a poem called `Nonetheless', which addresses her father's statement *Words Cannot Equal Experience*, the title of his autobiographical book, published by Pelanduk in 1985. The poet-daughter gently demonstrates that words can more than equal experience, that words can indeed master experience and give it shape and form:

> ... words are nearly all that we have:
>
> to think that we fell,
> to speak what we are,

to write what we live;
or experience itself
has nothing to give.

It is a tempered delight to read this latest volume but it is a keener delight to read it together with the two earlier books and note the progress of the poet.

ENDEARING STORIES THAT SHINE

Saving The Rainforest and Other Stories
by Claire Tham

Publisher: Times International (Singapore)

Review by Leonard Jeyam
23 January 1994 *The Star*

This review comes with a necessary disclaimer: I rarely read Singaporean fiction. The only reason I am attempting to review this book is that I do not wish to gain a reputation that I hob-nob only with our local *literati* (by *literati* I mean those who do not read popular fiction and who are ever willing to discuss the point of existence at all hours of the day).

I do, indeed, have friends who have not read a single book from cover to cover in their entire life!

And as much as I did not want to read another book of Singaporean fiction, more so that of a young writer, I have to graciously admit that much of this volume of short stories shine.

Saving the Rainforest and Other Stories is Claire Tham's second collection of short stories. I actually began to read this book simply because of its very catchy title story.

Expecting an environmentally sound piece of writing, or something at all that had to do with an aspect of silviculture (or the tending of trees), the big surprise is that the word

"rainforest" refers to a character, a name of a character: Rainforest Peace Png. (Absurd, no doubt, but if we remember the late American actor, River Phoenix, then perhaps such a name is more than plausible.)

Rain, as he is affectionately referred to, is a product of a passionate, unmarried, failed-hippie mother of the 70s that the word "bizarre" does not even begin to describe either mother or son, not at least in terms of their lifestyle or respective youth. They are both, in the narrator's opinion of Rain's mother, "true to her philosophy of doing precisely what she wanted and cocking a snook at the world's opinion". Both mother and son are vegetarians with a not-too-unusual commitment to save our endangered Mother Earth.

Age has made the elder more conventional, but extreme youth is a time for her son Rain to revel in. He is a kleptomaniac, slightly pompous, totally unconventional (though he does have to do his National Service) and dresses only in black, but possesses an obvious charm that even his mother's thirty-nine-year-old friend cannot help falling for. Then begins the love entanglement.

She, the thirty-nine-year-old lawyer friend, the narrator of the story, falls for Rain (as no doubt most of us would) but is continually burdened by the curdling doubt of the vast difference in age. Of course Rain's mother isn't amused; and both the fear of the age gap as well as the unending parental animosity spell out for the ill-starred loves the obvious eventuality of their relationship.

But *Saving the Rainforest* is so much more than just plot and storyline. Herein lies the saving grace of the book. Claire

Tham's humour and her prose that jogs ever so amiably are what make her volume of stories so endearing.

I would say that most of the stories in this volume are worth the attention of any serious reader. My only complain is that there's too much of that fashionable Singaporean theme of urban middle-class *angst* that one gets tired of reading about again and again, especially when, as yet, it only gets a two-dimensional portrayal.

The most satisfying story of all in my opinion is *Deep Sea Sloth*. No doubt it is riddled with the "vagrancies" of a young writer, such as the numerous literary metaphors that are employed too consciously, yet Ms Tham obviously has a gift for depicting character. It is a gift that tells us a wonderful future in fiction lies ahead of her.

The story is simple. "A", who is the narrator of the story, has reached a stage in his life that tells him that his past and future look mundane. He, in other words, is feeling jaded. Asexual, despite having a wife and a teenage kid he is unable to understand, he experiences a kind of mid-afternoon reverie where he sees "B", a world-weary 17-year-old boy, in a restaurant and decides to pick him up. Once home, guilt and an overwhelming sense of shame denies his libidinal freedom in getting the better of him and so he ends up sending the young boy home.

Now already with overtones of a father-son incestuous relationship, the story ends with A watching his son's football game in school, ironically thinking that no evil could every befall his son.

What is impressive about this story is that the character of the narrator (i.e. "A") has been carefully realised and hence invested with a kind of realism that is rare in Singaporean writing. Plot for once does not suffocate characterisation and the telling of a good story. *Deep Sea Sloth* has its moments, and its flaws nonetheless, but a flawed jewel is still previous in most of our untrained eyes.

I suppose it will be because of writers like Claire Tham that Singaporean fiction might even find a wholly distinct voice before the end of this century. Thank goodness that our future will be spared of reading stories that only leave a stomach-ache between our eyes. *Saving the Rainforest and Other Stories* holds the promise.

ON A LION WITH NO NAME

In Search of Words

Publisher: V. J Times (Singapore)
No. of pages: 213

Review by Leonard Jeyam
8 March 1992 *The Star*

Here is an anthology of poetry by five young Singaporeans; or to be exact, four Singaporeans and a Malaysian. What they have in common is that they are all former students of the Raffles Institution in Singapore, and proceeds from the sale of this book will go to their alma mater.

Of the five poets, Alvin Pang stands out from his peers. His opening poem, *Poetry at Last*, displays a maturity of thought and style that far exceeds his years. Although some would consider the idea of writing poetry about poetry as indulgent, this poem succeeds simply because the very fluency of Pang's language is matched by the poetic thought being explored:

There are years behind each word, each
Well thought hard sound or
Soft syllable, broiled to perfect delight:
Each is a gem, a dish, a delicacy

Exotic yet knowable, well-oiled and
Polished to give (as theysay)
That glint a spark of fire in the mind:
Critics must not be over-fed.

Sometimes I feel fatherly and proud;
Each poem is mine even if
They do not speak to me.I am a part
Sharp or subtle of every word I say.

Here, Pang is careful not to over-write, and so no word is wasted. The tone of voice is lean; yet the words are indeed "well-oiled and polished."

The late English poet W.H.Auden once said modern poetry tends to be more skillful than older verse, which employed a traditional metre, insofar as more complex ideas are able to be fused with a looser, more free pattern of speech. And the five poets here do display to a large extent a mastery of speaking intelligently within a suitable rhythmic line. Yet, they have nothing new to say.

Yes, the themes of love, familiar places, death, exile and world-weariness are all here; but such potentially rich material as seen from a Singaporean point of view is unfortunately, left untapped. The promising art of these poets fail to capture in an original way the island republic and its people that they are so obviously well-versed with.

Indeed most of these poets are technically proficient. Yet, despite being musical and employing difficult ideas in their pieces, their writing somehow seems divorced from culture. The breakthrough back into life is the missing ingredient in most of these poems.

A surprising feature which is highly evident in this anthology is that these young poets are not influenced by the Old Masters, namely T.S.Eliot, W.B.Yeats, or even possibly the

more contemporary Auden. Instead, it is obvious that the poetry of Irishman Seamus Heaney, probably the most important poet of the last decade, has captured their imagination. Often, while reading this book, you hear echoes of Heaney's sinewy rhythmic style and also his distinct feeling of cultural displacement.

And it is not that these young and impressionistic writers do not know this - they actually pay him numerous tributes! Pang writes a tribute to Heaney's tough masculine style that resonates with the natural world in "omphalos". "What / Splashes you must have heard, / Echoing freedom, what drips / Teased strained ears to catch the tune ... You sound and depths again, / Leaving / The well itself unquestionable."

And the only "Malaysian" poet here Jonathan Kuan Wei-Han who's "Chinese and then / Malaysian with Aussie PR" goes further in his humorous piece, "If only you could see my water Mr Heaney." Unlike the Irish natural landscape, however, it seems that all Singapore has to offer is an industrialised, car-filled city surrounded by the sea:

You would turn and barf all over
Your precious soil - only it would be covered
By the tarmac - hot reeking stuff burning
Rubber off tyres of waiting cars.

Cars that don't go anywhere - just
Stop and go when all the rest do.
All waiting now, to bait their way across
The putrid water. No omphalos here

Save the loud sucking sound -
Smelly fluid slurped down

The drain passing below
The bridge betwixt two worlds.

The "omphalos" that both Pang and Kuan refer to is what for Heaney represents the sensuous sounds of the countryside he was brought up in that marked the centre of his world. (The word itself is of Greek origin, meaning the naval.)

If it is true that poetry cannot be interesting without at the very least sounding interesting, then I must say wholeheartedly that *In Search of Words* is not only for the poetry buff. But if it is also true that talent along is not enough to make a poet equal to the circumstances of the world in which he finds himself, then I must also conclude that these five young writers have not reached their ultimate potential. Their incipient interest in the need to possess the resources and rich possibilities of the English language is a positive sign for the future. May they continue writing well into maturity!

SPURRED BY A SPURNED DREAM

The Girl from the Coast
by Pramoedya Ananta Toer
Translated by Harry Aveling

Pub: Select Books
No. of pages: 189

Review by Lim Chee Seng
1 April 1992 *New Straits Times*

Pramoedya Ananta Toer is a prolific author who resides, after many years in prison and many novels, in a house on a road named Multi Karya in the capital of Indonesia, where ironically his books are *opera non grata*. The recognition of his work is, it would seem, rising everywhere else but not in Indonesia, at least not officially.

Two of his translated novels published by Penguin Australia have recently been reviewed on this page (Aug 21) by Harry Aveling, the translator of this novel which was published some months ago in Singapore.

Pramoedya has been creatively spurred by a socialist dream which has been widely spurned, most recently and dramatically in the now defunct USSR. Nevertheless this socialist vision has given him a sense of mission and a discourse of struggle which animate his narrative.

The conversation between the Girl from the Coast, who returns to her coastal village as the "practice wife" of a Bendoro or nobleman, and her father as they walk on the beach is poignant and charged with a searing anger.

The oldest and wisest man in the village says (the father tells the daughter) that "we'll never get anywhere. We don't have any money. We don't have much of anything at all. We don't have a chance of getting to heaven. When we die, we all go straight to hell. It doesn't matter how hard we work, we'll never have a thing to show for our efforts."

The episode of the fish paste laced with clay at once hits out at the petty capitalist in the person of the "haji" with three wives to support. This man undermines the confidence of customers in local fish paste in a primitive act of economic sabotage so that the customers will buy fish paste from where his wives live.

But Pramoedya is not merely a doctrinaire novelist. Just when the narrative threatens to be swarmed by ideological musing between father and daughter in the episode on the beach, the novel displays Pramoedya's masterly use of surprise in the character of Mak Pin the masseuse.

In giving Mas Nganten or the Girl From the Coast a massage, Mak Ping, gets carried away by the Girl's beauty. The Girl then instinctively senses that Mak Pin is a man and recoils from him.

Surprise is used again with success, although it is almost the same surprise, in the last part of the novel when the Bendoro

of Demak turns out to be a woman. And when this surprise is sprung the story rushes inexorably to its interesting ending.

It is also after the long ideological section that the strongly written character of Si Dul Pendongeng or Dul the Storyteller emerges in the narrative. The heavier track of socialist rumination is abandoned for the lyrical way of the singing *pendongeng* with his tambourine.

Through characters such as Mak Pin, Mardinah's accomplices and the wise old man, Pramoedya depicts the harsher aspects of the society of the poor—their summary code of justice and keen survival instincts.

The drama of the divorce of the Girl from the Coast and the Bendoro is well-managed so that the huge emotions of the rejected wife and roughly treated mother of a newborn are not allowed to ruin the structure of the novel.

What comes through clearly is a damning indictment of the empty religiosity of the Bendoro who holds the form of religion but denies the spirit of it. His relationships are seen to be crassly exploitative and totally inhumane.

When the Girl from the Coast is thrown out of his mansion, her former matrimonial home, she calls the Bendoro a devil and a monster and the reader does not dare to contradict her.

The epilogue succumbs to a strong surge of coincidence but it is coincidence which is fitting and apt and not irritating. The Girl from the Coast is reunited with her daughter:

The startled women continued talking until finally, stunned and almost disbelievingly, they stared hard at each other. In a merciful act of Allah, the Girl from the Coast was reunited with the daughter she was forced to give up.

At the end of the novel the Girl seems to have chosen an appropriate place to die, out in the open. For a person used to the wide expanse of the sea to die out doors is infinitely better than to die in an enclosed space. All through the novel the sea is a leitmotiv which surges up at important points as a preferred contrast to the dark enclosed spaces of the Bendoro's mansion.

The standard of proofreading of this translated text, especially in the first third of the novel, leaves much to be desired, even demanded. This part of the text is peppered with typographical mistakes. But these are minor irritations. The novel is well worth reading for all that.

MAULED BY THE TIGER OF TRANSLATION

Tiger
by Mochtar Lubis
translated by Florence Lamoureux

Pub: Select Books
No. of pages: 128

Review by Lim Chee Seng
1 May 1991 *New Straits Times*

Mochtar Lubis provides an illuminating preface written in May 1982 to this translation of *Harimau! Harimau!*

The novel was first published in 1975 and won Indonesia's Book of the Year Award. The author tells us about the sources of this novel in his adolescence in Central Sumatra. The trek into the jungle springs from his own early expeditions; Pak Hitam's *huma* and house from "a well-built abandoned hut, its roof thatched with the abundant `tiger grass' that grew around it" and the chilling fear of an encounter with a tiger from a similar incident.

The "tiger" lurks in the text from the very beginning. It becomes increasingly menacing till at the end of the novel when it is shot dead. The conclusion reveals that the story is as much about a man-eating tiger as it is about the tiger within every man.

The main motivation of the novel is the examination of the nature of charismatic leadership. "I wanted to write an

allegory on the power of a charismatic leader ... The leader should be a *dukun* who could mesmerise the villagers as Sukarno had mesmerised millions of Indonesians."

This novel brings the leader face to face with his tiger. "In life we all face such challenges (our tigers). Some acquiesce to the tiger; some try to tame it and live in uneasy peace with it; still others, stronger and with greater courage, subdue it: but only a very few ever succeed in killing it."

In this tigerish scheme of humanity, who would deny that Mochtar Lubis himself is to be found among the very few. He has paid for the fight against corruption with many years of his life. He is not to be confused with those who write about corruption out of their own experience of perpetrating that evil.

The meditation on the hollowness of charismatic leadership is examined through the consciousness of Pak Haji, a man who had lost his faith but kept his religious title. At the end of the novel he recovers his belief and makes an affirmation before he dies. He sees with the sad and wise eyes of someone who has travelled the world and become thoroughly disillusioned with life.

However, his life closes with a rediscovery of trust in God. He is the character who sees through the charlatanism and moral bankruptcy of Wak Katok, the leader of the *damar*-gathering expedition which is set upon by a man-eating tiger.

Pak Haji is also the influence for good at the end of the novel. The hero Buyung, on the point of letting the tiger tear Wak Katok to pieces, accepts Pak Haji's advice in a passage steeped in straightforward didacticism:

*Everyone must oppose tyranny wherever he confronts it. It is wrong for people to isolate themselves and to shut their eyes to evil powers which oppress others. To be decent, carrying human beings, each person must subdue the tiger within himself. Buyung, now understood Pak Haji's words - **first kill the harimau within yourself** ...*

It is an indication of Mochtar Lubis's authority as writer and individual that this passage seems to be a fit conclusion to a novel that has strong qualities of surprise, suspense and sustained allegory.

To gain a wider international audience for books such as this well-written novel, there is a need to introduce them properly. Florence Lamoureux has written a bare and indifferent introduction. One longs for an elegant introduction such as that written by Adibah Amin for her OUP translation of Shahnon Ahmad's *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan (No Harvest But A Thorn*, recently reissued in a new school textbook edition.)

Nowadays, alas, one tends to get pedestrian introductions which introduce nothing and one is grateful if they manage not to be actively misleading. The run-of-the-mill introduction is usually stuffed full of trivialising comments of no critical value and given over to an uninspired and uninspiring summary of the book it purports to introduce.

In the translation we do not want the translator to abolish all difference, cultural or authorial. The flavour of the Indonesian original should come across strongly, its rhythms of thought and speech should be clearly heard. Mochtar Lubis should stand out through the self-effacing work of his translator.

Lamoureux has a flagrant quirk of transposing paragraphs and subdividing chapters of Mochtar Lubis's novel. Did her word-processor run amok? As far as I can see there was no benefit derived from the radical rearrangement.

One expects the translator to respect the author and to have a fundamental confidence in his aesthetic sense. It is the duty of the translator to render the original into another language but not to reorganise the text freely for no apparent reason.

Indeed any tampering with a text sets up the presumption that the original was incompetent and poorly written and thus needed the cosmetic attention of the translator. Lamoureux should have had a more robust respect for the original.

In an essay called `The Art of Translation', Vladimir Nabokov denounces as the worst grade of the evils of translation that in which "a masterpiece is planished and patted into such a shape, vilely beautified in such a fashion as to conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public". He decried "the slick translator who arranges Scheherazade's boudoir according to his own taste and with professional elegance tries to improve the looks of his (murder) victims".

There are some glaring mistakes and mistranslations in Lamoureux's translation and a few examples will suffice. "*Manusia*" is rendered as "modern people" when it should be "man" and "Pembuangan" as "prison" when it is "exile". The set piece of Mochtar Lubis's jungle description at the beginning of the novel is translated into an incredibly temperate forest with "open glades" and "exquisite meadows".

Inelegancies such as this abound: "Soon the menacing band *exited* the bedroom." (p. 20). What, Orwell would have asked, is wrong with "*left* the bedroom"? And Orwell is a germane name to invoke here as his influence on Mochtar Lubis in this novel is clear.

There are some corrections to the original and it is only fair to mention one striking instance. On page 37 of the original text, reference is made to "*pepatah tua-tua kepala* (sic)". The translator corrects this to give us the saying about the old coconut (*kelapa*) which yields more oil than the young one (p. 18).

Reading this translation, one wonders where the talented Indonesian counterparts of Malaysian translators such as Adibah Amin and Muhammad Haji Salleh are lurking. The novel should have received the attention of a better translator.

Those who want to enjoy Mochtar Lubis's novel fully should read the original text published by Pustaka Jaya in 1975 as *Harimau! Harimau!*. It is a pity that this prize-winning novel has been somewhat mauled by the tiger of translation. However, given the vitality of the original, the translation still impresses us with a sense of a powerful novel.

BREAKING THE MOULD

Sing to the Dawn: The Musical
Book by Minfong Ho and Stephen Clark
Music by Dick Lee and lyrics by Stephen Clark
Based on the book *Sing to the Dawn* by Minfong Ho

Pub: Times Book International

Review by Susan Philip

Something about the title of this book struck me as being vaguely pretentious: *Sing to the Dawn, The Musical.*

Isn't that kind of title usually reserved for musicals that became hugely famous in another form first? *Les Miserables*, for example, is billed as "The Musical Sensation" so that people can tell we're talking about the stage production, not the novel.

Thankfully, nothing else about Minfong Ho's book-turned-musical is pretentious.

Ho grew up in Thailand before leaving for Cornell University, and certain aspects of this book reflect her life.

In her Preface she mentions sitting with her brother on a bridge at dawn, and the "strong, complex bond" that once existed between them. Both these elements are central to the story she tells here.

The story is extremely simple. Dawan and her brother Kwai are part of a traditional, close-knit Thai village family. The whole family is expecting Kwai to win a scholarship to a school in Bangkok, and they are all fired-up with the knowledge that he will be able to make something of himself if he goes.

Dawan is wholeheartedly supportive of Kwai's dreams, even predicting his future by "reading" the ripples he makes by tossing pebbles in the water; this is her way of telling him that she believes he will be successful.

To everyone's surprise, it is Dawan who wins the scholarship, beating Kwai by a narrow margin, and throwing everyone's expectations and plans (including hers) into violent disarray.

She faces resentment from her disappointed brother, and outright disapproval from her parents, who plan to marry her off to a loutish but well-off schoolmate.

Initially her only encouragement comes from her grandmother, and her potential fiancee's sister. The rest of the book deals with her struggle to overcome familial and societal opposition, as well as her own fears, in order to go to the big city to study.

It is a simple story, very simply told, and it will come as no surprise that the novel is aimed specifically at young people. I can only assume (since the intention is not expressly mentioned) that the musical aims at the same group.

Ho mentions that writing "was a way of reassuring myself that yes, I did have a past, that home and Thailand and my

mother all exist". It was also "a way of telling my brother, in a way I could never do face-to-face, how much I missed him".

She focuses, in these comments, on the personal. However, her story seems to have a much wider frame of reference than the purely personal. There are few people, especially women, who could read this book and not recognise and empathise with certain aspects of Dawan's story.

It has always been, and still is, all too common to see the best opportunities going to the sons in a family. In Asia especially, female children are treated as a liability to be palmed off onto a husband as soon as possible, so that the "worry" of looking after these girls can be theirs.

It is the most vicious of vicious circles: girls were thought worthless because they could not go out into the workforce and bring home the kind of money that men could.

What's more, they would marry, and any education or earning power they might have received would be of benefit to the husband's family, not their own. Therefore, they were not educated. But it was only because they were not educated that they could not make much money, and therefore had to get married in order to be able to live.

Dawan is well on her way to becoming another inadequately educated and therefore dependent wife, when the cycle is interrupted by her winning the scholarship. The news brings to the fore a whole complex of different reactions. Dawan's parents are devastated that their hopes for their son will not materialise. They cannot transfer their hopes to their daughter.

For Dawan's father, firmly entrenched in the patriarchal tradition, it is unthinkable that a girl might benefit from education and eventually bring benefit to her family.

Her mother too initially feels the same way, though her feelings are mixed with her memories of their nightmarish sojourn in the city before coming back to the country. She cannot feel that her daughter will be safe, in such an evil place.

The village boys tease Kwai unmercifully about his defeat by his sister who has, they feel, completely violated the boundaries of what girls are allowed to do. Dawan's victory, they fear, will lead other girls to think that they can expect more out of life than the average man is willing to give them:

Vichai: *You think any of our sisters are going to be happy just sitting at home and taking orders from us, once they hear that your sister's going off to the city school Don't you think that'll set them thinking? Wanting other things? It's enough Kwai! You have to do something. Now!*

These views are rather baldly and simplistically expressed, but there is a relentlessly real tone to them. It is, sadly, all too easy to recognise these sentiments.

However, Dawan does find support, not only from her grandmother, but also some of the girls who run stalls in the marketplace.

There is a strong sense of sisterhood; the girls are excited that a girl has beaten all the privileged males, that she will be able to fulfil the dreams that have been denied them. Dawan's

mother, too, eventually realises that her daughter must grasp this chance to make a better life for herself.

Ho draws a strong network of supportive relationships among the womenfolk: they are remarkably selfless, helping Dawan in any way then can, even if they themselves will not directly benefit from her success.

There is a strong contrast with the men, who find it difficult to accept that Dawan even has the right to think of succeeding where a male has failed.

The most complex reaction comes from Kwai, who feels betrayed by Dawan, but at the same time cannot forget her unstinting, unquestioning love for him. He does the right thing, ultimately, but Ho's treatment of his feelings is realistic; he remains slightly resentful almost till the end.

He feels cheated of something that he considered to be his right - he should have got the scholarship, because he is the boy. It takes him a considerable time to shake off his upbringing and social conditioning, to be able to finally see the justice of Dawan's position.

Ho's character portrayal is not terribly complex. This may, of course, be the fault of the musical format, which does not allow as much room for character development as does the novel.

Her characters are drawn in very clear, simple lines; this unfortunately allows them to be `summed up' in the dramatis personae, in rather trite, superficial terms. For example, Dawan is "an angel with guts", her grandmother is "gentle and wise",

the teacher is "politically aware and active", etc, etc. These descriptions do a disservice to the characters who, though simple, are not completely two-dimensional.

Sadly, the book does not include a musical score, so I have absolutely no idea how the songs go. From a mere reading of the lyrics, they seem to be stuck in one groove, namely yearning and hoping, though there is a song vindicating maleness which could be mildly amusing.

Ho's original novel, published in 1975, was awarded the first prize by the Council on Interracial Books for Children. I can see why it won - it addresses an issue that cuts right across race.

It was of central concern in 1975 and sadly, 21 years later, the instinct to sacrifice a daughter's needs in favour of a son's is still rampant. I suppose we can only hope that novelists like Ho will have an impact on the younger generation.

HOMECOMING OF SIR V.S.NAIPAUL

India: A Million Mutinies Now
by V.S.Naipaul

Pub: Minerva
No. of pages: 521

Review by Lim Chee Seng
2 August 1991 *New Straits Times*

THIS book chronicles the homecoming of V.S. Naipaul to India. Naipaul comes home three times to come home once. His first trip to India was back in the Sixties.

An Area of Darkness (1964), the record of that journey, was a perverse book which justifiably earned him a reputation as the white-man's nigger.

India: A Wounded Civilisation (1977) was slightly better than the first book but still basically unsympathising and unsympathetic.

There is the infamous passage in *An Area of Darkness* which recalls the rhythms of Winston Churchill's famous wartime speech and consequently all the more unkind for the mock-heroic tone:

"Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches;

they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover."

I remember my own outrage on reading *An Area of Darkness* that Naipaul should go through India and take away with him as dominant images Indians shitting by the railway tracks in the morning or Tamil delegates at a Congress gathering eating by themselves because they feared pollution from non-Tamils and yet defecating on the verandah.

This is the critical eye of the satirist with no sympathy which readers found so objectionable.

I had gone through India in 1973, travelling with a student group, very much on the cheap. After the initial shock in the face of Indian poverty, I had revelled in the splendour of India.

How could Naipaul have seen so much of the squalor and so little of the splendour? What kind of blindness was it? There is something of an answer in this new book.

Naipaul manifests a greater insight now than when he saw India in 1962. That insight is as much into India as into himself as traveller through India. At the outset he confesses the limitations of his earlier books especially *An Area of Dark*ness.

"The India (Naipaul) carried as a neurosis, the India of poverty and an abjectness too fearful to imagine" stood between him and a justly clear vision of India. "The poverty of the Indian streets and the countryside was an affront and a threat a scratching at my old neurosis."

Coming from a place where Indians were in the minority, Naipaul also had a "continental idea of an Indian identity". This identity "with the nerves it continually exposed, would have made it hard for me to do worthwhile work in India" as indeed it did.

Any fair-minded reader of *An Area* of *Darkness* would attest to that. This is a disarming admission from a major writer, amounting almost to a repudiation of the earlier work.

Naipaul turns his obvious gifts of perceptiveness and incisive comment on himself to help us see where the perverse opinions of the earlier book came from.

From beginning to end, Naipaul registers and confronts the darkness, the incomprehension that he had shown on his 1962 trip. He speaks frankly of himself as a "fearful traveller", about what he did not understand, what he had missed and what he misread.

The new vision of India that Naipaul sees is not without its critical edge. But this only serves to validate his new insight into the vast sub-continent.

Indeed, anyone who ignores the unfavourable side of India would be guilty of falsification and misrepresentation.

He fully sees the glory of India now. I don't mean that he enthuses about the architectural and other cultural splendours of India. The glory he sees resides in the people, the greatest resource of modern India.

The stories he tells are representative capsule tales of millions of Indians - of scientists, poets, gangsters, film-writers and "boxwallah" executives. In many cases the faiths of these people are still strong though under stress, whether it is in Hinduism, Islam or the Brahmo Samaj inspired by Tagore.

The second chapter is an example. Called 'The Secretary's Tale', it has the suggestion of a Chaucerian tale with its connotations of the fantastic and the allegoric in the story of Rajan's family.

Naipual is a fine stylist though often prolix. He tells you every minute detail that this companion of the moment tells him and everything he says back.

There is a certain heuristic rambling that does not always pay off. However, when it does work it reminds us of Naipaul the novelist using the particular detail to suggest the universal, the essentially Indian.

The critical eye for the telling detail is there. Speaking of the practice of taking off one's shoes on entering a home or temple, Naipaul comments: "What the friend meant was that normally the ritual of taking off shoes - before entering a temple, for instance - meant walking on filth, getting your clean feet dirty in the name of ritual cleanliness."

This sharp comment is part of a vestigial obtuseness from the earlier books - the refusal to see the spiritual point of the ritual and infuriatingly insisting on the merely hygienic point of view.

However, to be fair, the filth does not bother Naipaul as much as it used to. There is a determined attitude of wanting to see for himself, to smell the stench and to feel the dirt in the slums.

The difference is that this time round, he does not mistake this aspect of India, this soiled face, for the essential India.

"In 27 years I had succeeded in making a kind of return journey, shedding my Indian nerves, abolishing the darkness that separated me from my ancestral past ... my ancestors had left as indentured servants for the sugar estates of Guyana and Trinidad. I had carried in my bones that idea of abjectness and defeat and shame."

This comes at the end of *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. The nerves which so troubled him and so radically obscured his vision and which he had called his "neurosis" at the beginning of the book are largely recuperated. Naipaul sees with the eyes of a man who seems to have come home.

The Indian Mutiny of 1857 had, of course, been against the British, the Western imperialist power of the day. Naipaul now sees India as a country of a million little mutinies.

One comes away from this book with the sense that Naipaul has also had his own personal mutiny during the travelling and writing that went into his third and by far his best book on India.

VINTAGE STUFF FROM SWAMI OF MALGUDI

Swami and Friends
No. of pages: 184
The Dark Room
No. of pages: 210
The Financial Expert
No. of pages: 218
by R.K.Narayan

Review by Lim Chee Seng
7 October 1991, *New Straits Times*

A reviewer can do nothing more useful than minister to the reader's reading or rereading of an author. When the author concerned is someone like R.K.Narayan, his duty is a most pleasant one.

Narayan is 90 this year (born Oct 10, 1906). He is an author whom one thinks of as eminently qualified to win the Nobel Prize but as age creeps up on him, the hope inevitably recedes while we see the parade of no doubt worthy but, it would seem, endless Latin American and European laureates trooping by.

Faulker was writing novels at about the same time and he won the Nobel Prize in 1950. Like Faulkner with his Yoknapatawpha County, Narayan has inhabited and elaborated a fictional world of some force and power.

Faulkner's world is however very different from Narayan's. Yoknapatawpha can often be powerfully haunting and sometimes bizarre in its reflection of life in the American South. Narayan's Malgudi, a South Indian town of some size, occupies a prominent place in a different region on the literary atlas.

It is a territory for which he has invented all the maps and one which he has fleshed out with such a charming spirit of comedy that the reader is reluctant to return to his or her anxiety-ridden world after an excursion to Malgudi. Narayan's realm is very different from but quite as compelling as Yoknapatawpha or the "Greeneland" of his friend and admirer, Graham Greene.

Narayan is still writing and his latest book, *Grandmother's Tales*, has just been published in 1991. The three novels of this review are however reissues of works originally published in the Thirties (*Swami and Friends* and *The Dark Room)* and Fifties (*The Financial Expert*).

Publishers are shrewd creatures who watch with great care the profitability of the artistic works they publish or buy the rights to. From this point of view, the publication histories of the three Narayan novels are interesting.

Take *Swami and Friends*. First published by Hamish Hamilton in 1932, it was reissued by Oxford University Press in 1978 and then reissued by the University of Chicago Press in 1980. The review copy is the third reissue. This clearly points to an abiding and a wide interest in Narayan.

Swami and Friends is a famous first novel. It is an evocation of the schoolboy world of Swami and co. which is

distinguished by its well-tempered depiction of adolescent relationships and concerns. The novel unfolds against the backdrop of the Indian independence movement, exploring its disruptive but attractive force on the lives of cricket-loving schoolboys who also deeply desire to be Indian.

The Dark Room gestures at the themes of women's liberation in an oppressively male-chauvinist society (and this in 1938). The story explores the lot of women and their treatment by men (Shanta Bai, Ponni and Savitri).

It is primarily Savitri's story. She is the occupant of the Dark Room, the faithful and subservient wife of Ramani, who heads the Engladia Insurance Company's Malgudi branch. Everything would have gone on in the same servile way had not Ramani taken up with the enticing Shanta Bai when she joined the company as a canvasser.

Savitri bears with her husband's liaison until it becomes untenable and she leaves home and attempts suicide in the Sarayu River. Mani, the locksmith *and* picklock, happens on the scene and rescues her. Savitri has a go at earning her own keep by turning caretaker of a Hindu temple but in the end she returns to her family.

The novel ends poignantly. Savitri has chosen to return home. The burglar-rescuer of Savitri passes her house on his job-rounds shouting out, "Locks repaired." Savitri suppresses her strong urge to call out to him. She has no further need of Mani's services either as locksmith or pick-lock.

She has not so much chosen to re-enter the dark room of her marriage as to reassume command of her matrimonial home,

where her children are, and from where she had literally come and gone as she pleased and where things will never be on the same docile footing again.

V.S.Naipaul recounts a meeting with Narayan in 1961 in his book *India: A Wounded Civilisation* (1977). He reports Narayan's oracular pronouncement that "India will go on" and uses Narayan's novels as the handle to open the door into India.

"To get down to Narayan's world, to perceive the order and continuity he saw in the dereliction and smallness of India, to enter into his ironic acceptance and relish his comedy, was to ignore too much of what could be seen, to shed too much of myself: my sense of history, and even the simplest ideas of human possibility. I did not lose my admiration for Narayan; but I felt that his comedy and irony were not quite what they had appeared to be, were part of a Hindu response to the world, a response I could no longer share ... for all their delight in human oddity, Narayan's novels are less the purely social comedies I had once taken them to be than religious books, at times religious fables, and intensely Hindu."

Naipaul's main charge against Narayan's view of life is that it is vitiated by withdrawal from life's harsh realities. He sees this as a typical Hindu response signalling "the death of a civilisation, the final corruption". This account does not square with the significant text of the *Bhagavad Gita* with its call to action in the face of the harshest human realities. It certainly does not sort very well with the Narayan novels of this review.

Swami and Friends is ostensibly a portrait of an idyllic childhood world but it is one that Narayan demonstrates as torn asunder by the upheaval of the fight for Independence.

Savitri's return to her home is superficially a withdrawal. Properly considered, it is a tough confrontation with a harsh domestic reality and by no means the withdrawal that death by drowning in the Sarayu River or sequestration in a Hindu temple would have been.

Margayya, the financial expert, perhaps least fits Naipaul's generalised allegation of withdrawal. Ruined more than once by a spoilt son, Margayya springs back with alacrity. When towards the end of the novel the run on his `bank' bankrupts him, he does not withdraw but turns again to the tools of his beginning as a financial adviser under the banyan tree in front of the Co-operative Bank.

He offers the wastrel son Balu the tools with which to generate some wealth and when he refuses, Margayya resolves to put his own `talent' to work yet once more. This is how the novel closes:

"Very well then, if you are not going, I am going on with it as soon as I am able to leave this bed," said Margayya. "Now get the youngster (his grandson) here. I will play with him. Life has been too dull without him in this house."

It is a conclusion in which nothing is concluded, least of all Margayya's financial career and hopes for his offspring.

These three novels have aged extremely well. They are vintage Narayan.

WITTY, RELEVANT LOOK AT SUBJUGATION

The Pleasures of Conquest
by Yasmine Gooneratne

Pub: Penguin Books
No. of pages: 322

Review by Carol Leon
22 November 1995 *New Straits Times*

Yasmine Gooneratne's second novel, *The Pleasures of Conquest*, is a bold and sparkling work. "A novel of the post-colonial Nineties" - so declares the blurb - it probes the fascinating, mysterious relationship between East and West.

It is 50 years since Amnesia has attained Independence from the British and out of the remnants of a long history of colonial subjugation, the tropical island-nation has forged a new life for itself, or so it seems. The tranquility of the island is constantly upset by terrorist activities in the north, bomb scares, civil disorders - unmistakable allusions to the unrest in Gooneratne's beautiful native island of Sri Lanka. (But Gooneratne, who now lives in Australia, writes in the author's note that the Sovereign Republic of Amnesia "has no existence outside (her) own imagination"). The colourful and animated Amnesiacs have certainly forgotten their past and are still lulled by the deceptiveness of appearance, glamour and "noble intentions".

Amnesia's lingering bastion of colonialism, The New Imperial Hotel, is the lavish backdrop against which various hues and shades of personalities flit around, weaving intriguing tapestries of human nature. Just like their forefathers, who plundered the land and lived comfortably on the spoils of the international elite who thronged the gracious halls of the five-star hotel, they also relish such deified treatment.

A mariner's chart by Gerard van Ryckman commissioned in 1720 by the Dutch East India Company is translated into a magnificent floor-chart covering the entire lobby and exotic illusion that frequently threatens to subsume the real happenings that are taking place. When Stella Mallinson visits Amnesia and sits on a throne-like chair in the Imperial's lobby, she resembles the wonderfully-clad queen in van Ryckman's painting. Her "appearance sustained the illusion".

Stella is one of four main characters, each of whom dominates a section of the book. She is a celebrity writer whose novels always make the bestseller list. She also supports environmental concerns: her designer bags and clothes ably withstand the sometimes cruel conditions she has to endure trying to save an endangered animal. In Amnesia she is on yet another mercy mission. This time, the endangered species is the native writers whose opportunities for publication are extremely limited compared to their Western counterparts. So Stella gathers a writing group and under her guidance they embark on a massive novel entitled *Nine Jewel Rice*. Stella, hotshot writer, is surprised when "in some magical, unexplainable way and, without any kind of warning, invention simply took off and creation would be suddenly in full swing." She is utterly convinced of her selfless role in and the impeccability of the undertaking suitably called the Mallinson Project. Gooneratne's

portrayal of the writer of international repute is hilarious. The media, the promotion stunts, the corny, well-rehearsed interviews conjure the hype and hypocrisy which are symptomatic of the celebrity status.

Philip Destry, an old flame and ex-colleague of Stella at Maitland State University, is the second voice in the novel. Chauvinistic and egotistical, he considers himself a true scholar, his vocation likened to the colonial conquests of yore: "Like the imperial enterprise, academic life can also call for many little sacrifices along the way."

It is in the second section that we are told in some depth about Sir John D'Esterey, the 19th-century British Resident for the Inner Kingdom of Amnesia. His distinguished career as a diplomat was ultimately rewarded with a Baronetcy. Yet a mystery surrounds the man - was he a spy or an able administrator? - and it creeps into the four distinctly different sections of the book. Philip, for instance, who does research on D'Esterey, develops an affinity for the latter. Stella buys an ivory jewel box (yes ivory!) that was believed to be a gift from D'Esterey to a beautiful local poet called Dona Isabella Cornelia.

Angela van Langenburg and Mallika are the two other protagonists in the novel. Angela, born in Amnesia but residing abroad, returns for a visit. Mallika is the proud native, illiterate but knowledgeable in the culture and ways of the land. The narrative, light and deliciously snide in the first two sections, takes on a somewhat sombre ("somewhat" because a sense of gaiety persists throughout the novel) tone in the last sections. Recently divorced, Angela's homecoming is particularly poignant as she met and married Peter and gave birth to her son Julian in Amnesia. Her reminiscences also evoke memories of a

tumultuous past covering the end of World War II and the uprisings. Before she leaves for home, she receives news that her son has willfully crashed his bike into the window of a supermarket. Bewilderedly she questions herself: "Had Peter and Angela done right by their only son when they took him out of the safe environment of their homeland and abandoned him in a world of hostile strangers?"

Mallika, regal and defiant, is a spokesperson for the rich oral tradition of the "unlettered folk". She talks about how this tradition is considered inferior to the authority of the written word but that ultimately there is no distinction as the "streams of intellect and imagination flow together in a single bed". The last section is full of surprises. It begins meditatively enough with the sage musings of Mallika. The pact picks up toward the end, however, with rumours of a supreme guru who will save the ailing land. Wait till you find out the identity of this blessed being!

The Pleasures of Conquest has three important things going for it. First the novel has an epic breadth and scope that also distinguishes Gooneratne's first award-winning work, *A Change of Skies*. We are introduced to a whole host of characters and issues. The allusions and symbols are both intriguing and funny. This takes us to the other two strong elements in the book - its wit and relevance. With Swiftian sharpness and subtlety, the author lays open life's ironies and discrepancies. She hits out at arrogant conquerors, willing, easily-awed victims, relationships on personal and international levels, fake ideals and convenient justifications.

The title of the novel is particularly appropriate. The golden age of imperialism is no doubt over, but modern forms of

conquest equally insidious, still prevail. Whether it be in politics, publication, literary research, religion or gender, the ability to subdue and exploit must indeed be a pleasurable experience!

OF GREY LIVES AND GREYER TIES

Janani
by Shaukat Osman

Review by Shalini Teresa Fernandez

There have been some stunning literary works coming out of India, but generally, they are little-known because they are written in the vernacular and beyond the comprehension of most readers.

Heinemann has selected six of these novels and published them in translation under its `Asian Writers Series'. One of these is *Janani* by Shaukat Osman, a Bengali Muslim writer of extraordinary grace, who has published some 60 volumes of poetry, fiction, essays and drama. His novel, *The Slave's Laugh*, a satire of the political climate of his country, won him a national literary prize.

Janani is a tale about Dariabibi, a poor Muslim peasant who strives to support her family through constant difficult circumstances. Married to Azhar Khan, a gentle but immovable orthodox Muslim who is far from practical, Dariabibi struggles to keep her children and other dependents fed and clothed.

Often, when the harsh realities of poverty become too much for him, Azhar vanishes, leaving his wife to provide for the family. Dariabibi, a strong woman of natural refinement and dignity who loathes the idea of depending on others, is slowly and gradually forced to subvert her pride and independence in

order to stave off starvation and utter penury. She becomes a victim of the socio-cultural practices of the small, closed world of her village.

Although the novel is called *Janani*, which means `mother', a thoroughly symbolic reference to the role Dariabibi embodies to perfection, there are other elements which give it greater distinction. One of them is the undertone of political satire that flows through the pages.

Set in the turbulent pre-Independence period of Indian-Pakistani history, the novel subtly shows how religious fervour can be, and is, exploited for wholly materialistic purposes. This is evident from the way the *samindars* (landlords) Rohini Choudhury and Hatem Bakhsh Khan (one of the rich Khans, not related to Azhar) deliberately goad the Hindus and Muslims against each other, all for a strip of land.

The divisive differences that can tear a religious community apart are also depicted, albeit humorously, through the comic antics of two Muslim sects which hire *moulanas* (Muslims respected for their learning) to outdo each other.

But the most telling instances of satire arise from the author's portrayal of how religious differences affect people on a very personal level though the tenuous and poignant relationship of Azhar Khan and Chandra Kotal, a whimsical low-caste Hindu.

It is interesting to note, however, that only the men seem interested in, and are partial to the religious conflicts. The women, as a whole, carry on living and preserving their friendships, without taking religious differences into account. The microcosmic world of Moheshdanga, where Dariabibi and

her family live, is perhaps reflective of and interwined with the large pre-Independence Bengali world teetering on their doorstep.

Sensitive characterisation and development of complex inter-personal relationships are other facets that make this novel outstanding.

Shaukat Osman shows great understanding and sympathy in his mounding of all the people in the novel, from Dariabibi to Ashekjan, her husband's poor, distant relative who lives with them until her death (and whose matter-of-fact acceptance of charity from others horrifies Dariabibi because she is terrified of not being able to manage for herself), and other minor characters whom Azhar meets during his frequent absences from home.

The pathos that lurks in the background of these characters comes through in the quality of the lives they lead, and their perpetual struggle to survive from day to day. During the times when Azhar leaves home, Dariabibi often has to starve, so as to feed her children.

Relationships in the novel are never simple, never black or white. As in the real world, they are often ambivalent and confused, like Dariabibi's feelings for Azhar, whom she cannot depend upon, and later for his rich cousin Yakoob, who always comes to visit with an open-handed geniality that hides his true intentions. In the end, despite what Yakoob has done to her she is able to look at him and recognise, stripped of gender and wealth, the common humanity that they share.

Although the translation of *Janani* by Osman Jamal tends to seem odd on occasion (due mainly to the translation of idiomatic phrases peculiar to the Bengalai language and which,

therefore, sound somewhat strange in English), the language of the novel comes across with a vividness and power that stem from its simplicity and which make it eminently readable. *Janani* is an extraordinary novel, whichever way you look at it.

SETH'S SUITABLY WRITTEN EPIC

A Suitable Boy
by Vikram Seth

Pub: Phoenix House
No. of pages: 1349

Review by Susan Philip
9 June 1993 *New Straits Times*

In his prefatory `Word of Thanks', Vikram Seth asks us to buy the book "before good sense insists/ You'll strain your purse and sprain your wrists" - believe me, if you do buy it you'll do both. At RM89.80 (hardcover), it's pretty pricey, and at 1,349 pages, it really is a strain on the wrists.

But it's worth it - reading the book (once you've found a comfortable position from which to grapple with its imposing bulk) is most definitely not a strain, and its initially daunting length does not stretch unbearably, or even sag and tire. This book will keep you reading, because it has a good story to tell, and it is well told.

The title will tell you what, at heart, the novel is all about. Mrs Rupa Mehra, widowed mother of four, is worried about her independent-minded, university-educated daughter Lata. She's getting mixed up with the wrong kind of people, and Mrs Mehra must do her duty as a mother: she must settle her daughter down by settling her down - with, of course, a suitable boy.

This situation is established at the beginning of the novel (in the very first words, in fact), and is not resolved until the end. And in the intervening pages, Seth creates a huge tapestry depicting post-Independence India, just emerging from under the `protection' of the British colonisers, and trying, through the first General Election, to find its own identity.

A Suitable Boy is an epic novel - not only in its length, but also in the scope of its material. Yes, this is a love story: it details Mrs. Mehra's sometimes overwhelming, stifling, but always sincere love for her children; the love between her elder daughter Savita and Savita's new husband Pran; and most of all Lata's search for love - her own search for a suitable boy, and her clashes with her mother over this matter.

But it is also a political novel (or more accurately a novel about the discovery of a political and national identity), and Seth succeeds in interweaving these disparate elements into a unified whole.

While exploring the love story, he introduces a range of characters who help him to encompass the hugeness that is India. There are four main families in the novel - the Mehras, the Kapoors, the Khans, and the Chatterjis; they are all related, either through marriage or very close friendship. Their spreading network encompasses politicians, academics, judges, lawyers, landowners, doctors, up-and-coming young Indian executives, socialites, courtesans, musicians, shoe-makers, Englishmen, Germans, merchants, Rajas, even a few untouchables.

Through the families and their associates, Seth is able to show practically the whole of India, and the problems and

upheavals it went through and was still going through in the 1950s.

Politically, the novel centres on the battle by Minister of Revenue Mahesh Kapoor to pass the Zamindari Abolition Bill - a bill that will effectively destroy a centuries-old way of life by taking away huge tracts of Muslim-owned land and redistributing them.

Seth's strength is that he does not present the political situation in purely abstract, political terms. Because the four main families are so representative of the variety and sweep of India, he is able to embody the politics in human form. We see the effects of political changes, of new legislation, on the lives of people whom we have come to know intimately. The whole political situation is humanised.

We are made aware also of the violent hostility always brewing beneath the surface in Hindu-Muslim relations: the Raja of Marh wants to rebuild a temple not purely for holy reasons, but because it will be situated to the west of a mosque, and he rather venomously enjoys the idea of Muslims bowing in the direction of a temple when they pray. The violence that erupts when a Hindu and a Muslim festival collide is made more shocking, more horrifying, because characters we know are involved and in danger.

The real strength of the novel, I think, is that though it is epic and has a huge scope, it is all so tightly harnessed that there is no letting up of tension, no chance for us to lose interest. This of course is partly because Seth shares the story equally between the four families; thus instead of wearying us with a thousand-

page narrative of the trials and tribulations of one family, he allows us variety of character, a mixture of people and problems.

There are many, many characters, but Seth does not lose sight of any of them; they are sharply, humanly drawn. One of the most attractive, sympathetic characters is Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor - gentle, dignified, devout, devoted to her husband. At the other end of the scale is Mrs. Rupa Mehra; hers is a more comic portrait but never to the level of caricature. Her virtue is her huge capacity for love.

In the young people (the Mehra, Kapoor, Khan, and Chatterji children) Seth embodies all the confusions of the emergent generation that will have to make something of the new, independent India. Caught between British colonialism and Indian independence, where do they go?

We have Arun Mehra (Rupa's eldest son), an unlikeable, arrogant snob, a complete Anglophile, though he has never been to England (we realise this under amusing circumstances that are thoroughly embarrassing for Arun). In contrast to him is Haresh Khanna, who has been to England but remains honest and unaffected, and who barrels his way into a European stronghold without becoming (like Arun) a mock European himself.

Lata Mehra is also a very finely drawn character. Educated and intelligent, she struggles to find some stable place to stand. She is caught between her mother's efforts to marry her off, the Chatterji girls' attempts to pair her up with their own brother Amit, and her own passion for the handsome, cricket-playing Kabir. It is Lata's search for some solution that best reflects the struggles that India is going through in trying to find political solutions that will accommodate all her diverse peoples.

The climax of the novel is the General Election in which for the first time, this huge country decides its own fate; this is reflected microcosmically in Lata's decision (and it is, finally, *her* independent decision) as to whom she will marry.

A Suitable Boy is a beautifully written book - it is, most of the time, gently amusing, but Seth can also take us over the edge into sheer horror, as when we witness the fatal crush of humanity on the banks of the Ganges at the Pul Mela, or the sudden eruption of violence between Hindus and Muslims in the midst of religious devotions.

Towards the end, an obsession results in a stabbing, which leads to a death - and here again, Seth creates the appropriate tone of tragedy and deep sadness. But it is so tightly controlled, it doesn't slip into melodrama.

Seth displays control of his craft throughout; he obviously delights in playing with language, as can be seen from the couplets that the Chatterjis constantly create, the dreadful poems read out at meetings of the Brahmpur Literary Society, and from Amit's poetry. But Seth's vivid, creative use of language does not intrude on the narrative. He does not let his delight in words carry him away.

He has created an accurate social representation of a massive country, filled with vital, human, *real* people. But though utterly real, the book is never dull or prosaic; it is as multi-faceted and fascinating as the country itself.

AN OBSESSION WITH BEAUTY

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion
and
Forbidden Colours
by Yukio Mishima

Pub: Penguin

Review by Neil Khor Jin Keong
(new review)

Recalling his acquaintance with Yukio Mishima, the American playwright Tennessee Williams, had many good things to say about the Japanese novelist, one being admiration for the sheer volume of Mishima's works. Mishima, despite his premature demise in 1970, had completed fifty volumes of works that included novels, plays and poetry. Two of Mishima's works translated into English are *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion (1959)*, published originally as *Kinkakuji*, in 1956 and *Forbidden Colours* (1968) or *Kinchiki,* written in 1951. Williams found in Mishima, an affinity for art shared only by artists. When the playwright met Mishima in Tokyo, he claimed to have sensed "tension and gravity" in the artist. A few months after that meeting, Mishima shocked the world by publicly committing hara -kiri. In many ways, Mishima's concern for the collapse of old traditions in Japan echoes Williams' sentimental attachment for the romantic world of the American South. The playwright's attraction for Mishima's works also lies in the affinity they share as gay men. One aspect that characterised both writers is their obsession with beauty.

Like Williams' A *Streetcar Named Desire,* the homosexual subtext in Mishima's "covert" works is only apparent to the 'initiated'. It relies on a complex network of subtle nuances, inferences and stereo-type characters, to create for the reader queer moments of identification. While in Williams' works there is an obvious Puritanical attitude towards the subject, Mishima's novels, even in translation, is pristinely free of the judgmental overtones of the American writer. As Nancy Wilson Ross explains in the introductory notes to Ivan Morris' translation of *Kinkakuji,* "those dualisms of black and white, body and soul, good and evil that we take so for granted are not found in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion."* When homosexuality becomes the focus of his narrative, the world of the novel is transformed; opening up districts that would otherwise remain in the shadows, divulging secrets that would otherwise remain hidden. This happens in *Kinchiki* or *Forbidden Colours,* translated by Alfred H. Marks, whose translation successfully captures the essence of Tokyo's forbidden world. Examined together, both novels offer the reader a contrapuntal glimpse of Mishima's perception of beauty.

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion (Temple), was based on the destruction of the Kinkakuji, a temple that was considered to be the pinnacle of Buddhist garden architecture. Built in the 15th century, it was a national treasure. An unbalanced student of Zen Buddhism, who could not reconcile himself with his deformity, burned it down. The young man, Mizoguchi in the novel, believes himself to be very ugly and delights in the destruction of the temple because, to him, the temple is the personification *of* what he can never possess - beauty. Mishima's treatment of this condition is both sensitive and brutal. On one hand, Mizoguchi's obsession with beauty is explained as a result of his own deformity and stuttering but by the end of the novel,

Mishima not only condones the latter's actions, he celebrates the brutality of violating the temple, almost as though he too sees beauty as an enemy. Mizoguchi, like the post-modern public, cannot divorce himself from a yardstick that measures self-worth according to physical attractiveness. The novel opens with him saying: "Ever since childhood, father had often spoken to me about the Golden Temple", suggesting that the youth has been conditioned to believe in the importance of the world without. This obsession with the (temple) of beauty is explicated as the narrative continues, simultaneously explaining, Mizoguchi's background as the son of a Shinto priest, the poverty and suffering of his mother and his present position as an acolyte in the Golden Temple. At the heart of the young student's perception of beauty, Mishima attempts to convey, is the inescapable solipsism of a world that is centred on the external rather than on what is within:

> Until then I had not seen the full face of rejection. My face, I thought, was one that had been rejected by the world, but Uiko's face was rejecting the world. The moonlight was mercilessly pouring over her forehead, her eyes, the bridge of her nose, her cheeks; but her motionless face was merely washed by the light. If she had moved her eyes or her mouth even a little, the world, which she was striving to reject, would have taken this as a signal to come surging into her.

Uiko, who had committed suicide because she could not be with her lover, wears a mask that refuses to betray to the world what she felt, or yield to perception, who she is. For Mizoguchi, the world within is full of ugliness that personifies itself in his physical deformity. He is trapped by his own perception of beauty, one that stems from seeing himself as 'the other'.

But what if conversely Mizoguchi had been handsome and irresistible to the world? Would his perception of the world change? In *Forbidden Colours,* Mishima offers exactly that situation and pose that question to his readers. *Forbidden* trails the 'coming out' of a beautiful youth named Yuichi. Like Mizoguchi, the youth has grown up feeling 'different' because of his attempt to repress a part of himself that society has conditioned him to believe is "deviant":

> For eight years or so since his puberty Yuichi had set himself against sexual desire, which he detested. He kept his body pure. He involved himself in mathematics and sports - geometry and calculus, high jumping and swimming...If I, who, though, I cannot love women wish only to love women, loved the boy after all a man - would [I] not become transformed into some unspeakably ugly, woman-like creature? (Yuichi asks himself)

Though Yuichi is beautiful, he is oblivious to it because of his homosexuality. Yuichi equates homosexuality with inferiority. Being homosexual, he believes, reduces "a boy to a girl". Upon meeting Shunsuke, an old writer in the winter of his life, Yuichi begins to learn of what the world perceives of him. In the world of Mishima, beauty is dictated by objectivism. Yuichi's affinity for Greek precision is anthithetical to the beautiful curves of the female figure. Like the Golden Temple itself, beauty in the eyes of Mishima must be based on the definable straight lines of the male body:

> Like a moon that hangs in the night sky, the Golden Temple had been built as a symbol of the dark ages. Therefore it was necessary for the Golden Temple of my dreams to have darkness bearing down on it from all sides. In this darkness, the beautiful, slender pillars of the building rested quietly and steadily, emitting a faint light from inside. Whatever words people might speak to the Golden Temple, it must continue to stand [erect], displaying its delicate structure to the eyes of the world and enduring the darkness that surrounded it.

Yuichi discovers at Rudons, a local cafe for homosexuals, that he is the personification of beauty. Yuichi's body surpassed that of "ancient Greek sculptures" and was like "the Apollo moulded in bronze by an artist of the Peloponnesus school". Like the Golden Temple, Yuichi's body is the temple that homosexual men worship and wish to possess. As he discovers at Jackie's party, later in the text, homosexuality is attractive because it gives order to the subjective world of Yusako, his emotional wife and indefinable world of his mother, an ailing matriarch who defies even death. Men's love for the male flesh, in this case for Yuichi's body, brings order to the indefinable and it is here that Yuchi's beauty serves its purpose:

> But when these men danced, arms intertwined, there was a feeling that they were forced by the impulse into a dark bondage. Why is it that men must, in spite of themselves, assume a posture to show they love each other? What is it but that kind of love, confused by the impulse, may perhaps not be consummated if the dark taste of destiny is not present...There Yuichi beheld the conclusion of the fate that had been first recorded for him. He saw

> precisely, in concrete form, the complete truth of that fate.

Yuichi's fate, like Mizoguchi's, is linked to the physical yardstick of beauty. In Yuichi's case, he cannot find himself in the mirror anymore. He, as a person, has been transformed by the gaze of others and made into a pinnacle of beauty that others measure themselves against. Yuichi is the phoenix that crowns the Golden Temple.

If beauty, as this argument is heading, is ocular-centric (in this case dictated by the writer's gaze), in what direction is Mishima's perception of beauty leading to. Again, the two novels offer a contrapuntal hint to Mishima's direction in this pilgrimage to the temple of beauty. In *Temple,* Mizoguchi begins to learn to defy being defined by the world but instead of rehabilitating himself from within, he strikes at the world without. As he learns that the Superior of the temple is a womaniser, the external world itself is transformed. It is through his conversations with the club footed Kashiwagi that he learns that beauty is a matter of perception. The climatic moment comes when he is faced with the demands of an American soldier and a Japanese prostitute. As he participates in an 'ugly' act, Mizoguchi learns to take his logic one step further, as he tells Kashiwagi: "Beauty, beautiful things...those are my most deadly enemy". In his ocular-centric view of things, everything around him that is beautiful exacerbates his ugliness and in the case of women, impedes sexual fulfilment. The ugliness within is transferred to the world without:

> The world outside me had cooled down in parts and had been reheated. How shall I put it? I felt that the outside world was spotted and again that it was striped. My inner

being and the outer world slowly and irregularly changed places. The meaningless scene that surrounded me shone before my eyes; as it shone, it forced its way into me and only those parts of the scene that had not entered continued to glitter vividly in a place beyond... [everything] became inextricably connected with the clog that lay at my feet".

Soon, his surroundings begin to become oppressive:

> My heart was pounding. Now I must leave. The word almost seemed to be fluttering in the air. Whatever happened, I must leave - leave my surroundings, leave my conception of beauty which so shackled me, leave the isolated obscurity in which I lived, leave my stuttering and all the other conditions of my existence.

Mizoguchi has decided that the Golden Temple is his enemy. If his sense of self worth is attached to his perception of beauty, the nihilist in Mishima insists that, the destruction of that conception will liberate Mizoguchi from ugliness. In *Temple,* this means destroying the Kinkakuji.

Similarly Yuichi destroys the mirror that his benefactor Shunsuke had set up for him. Shunsuke had created for Yuichi the perfect disguise that a homosexual man desires - the image of a playboy. By using Yuichi's beauty, Shunsuke has been able to exact revenge on the women who betrayed him, especially Mrs. Karubagi. Shunsuke has also created the worst revenge possible for womankind by making Yusako, Yuichi's wife, blame herself for her husband's lack of interest in sex. While Mizoguchi cannot escape the ugly world within himself, in fact it poisons his perception of the world without, Yuichi is trapped by his external beauty precisely because he has no sense of self outside the gaze

of others. His whole being is 'perceived' and constructed by Shunsuke. Ironically this narcissus breaks free from the mirror of other people's perception when he witnesses the birth of his daughter:

> Until now Yuchi had been incapable of feeling he existed unless he 'was seen' in toto. His consciousness of existing, in short, was a consciousness of being seen. The youth now revelled in a new sense of existence, an indubitable existence in which he was not looked at. In short, he himself was seeing.

Destroying the mirror of perception, by this I mean overcoming being perceived as beautiful or perceiving only the beautiful, leads to the reincarnation of these characters. Although Mizoguchi had planned to die with the temple that he was going to burn, he finds himself surviving the violent rebirth from the inaction that has trapped him before. Destroying the one thing in his life that he felt made him feel ugly meant the destruction of the perception that has shackled him all this while. Upon finishing the act, he "noticed a pact of cigarettes. .and started smoking. I felt like a man who settles down for a smoke after finishing a job. I wanted to live".

In *Forbidden,* the conclusion is however more complex. Yuichi, who is now resolved to see himself as a person, and who have, in a sense, regained a new identity must resolve his enigmatic ties with his benefactor. Just as Mizoguchi inverts the respect accorded to the Superior by giving the latter a carton of cigarettes, as though to defile him, Yuichi needs to sever his ties with Shunsuke, his mentor in the art of disguise. Like Kashiwagi, Shunsuke ill-treats women mercilessly to compensate for a sense of inferiority that he feels about himself. Kashiwagi, because of

his clubfoot, is a sadist; while Shunsuke, a more complex character, is, a misogynist because of the betrayal that he has been repeatedly exposed to in the hands of women. In severing ties with Shunsuke, Yuichi has truly taken the first step towards independence but not without a price. Shunsuke, in fact, brings Yuichi closest to self-dissolution when they part company. As the old writer says, "A man cannot be born of his own will, but can will to die". As though tying itself to *Temple,* which began with the suicide of Uiko, Mishima ends *Forbidden* with the self-inflicted death of Shunsuke. Like Keat's "Grecian Urn", death is the ultimate state of stasis that stops the flow of flux, giving beauty permanence. This is the extreme end for a personality obsessed with beauty.

In Mishima's solipsistic world, Yuichi's first steps towards a world free of the obsession with beauty is merely the victory of one individual while the rest remain cocooned in the obsessive gaze of their creator. More insidiously, Mishima suggests that the escape is merely temporal. Similarly for Mizoguchi, self-realisation from a world free of ugliness comes at the destruction of a mere symbol of an unattainable beauty. Whether or not the young man will be cleansed of this obsession depends on how much of him has died in the Golden Temple. As the Japanese have already rebuilt the Kinkakuji, so the phoenix of beauty rises from its ashes, and according to some "is more beautiful and more golden than before". Will the obsession with beauty ever be overcome? The answer lies in the last thoughts of the protagonist in *Forbidden* who says to himself at the end of the novel: "First you get your shoes shined".

GOING THEROUX'S WAY

The Happy Isles of Oceania
by Paul Theroux

Pub: Penguin
No. of pages: 733

Review by Margaret Yong
3 July 1993 *New Straits Times*

Ah, Tahiti, Bali Hai, Waikiki, Papeete ... the picture of paradise. Pristine white sandy beaches, sparkling blue seas, gently swaying palm trees, lovely hula hands and native girls ready to fall into our arms - well, you must agree with Paul Theroux that this has always been a male fantasy.

Paul Theroux's big new travel book takes a fresh and long hard look at this conventional dream of the South Seas and finds it far from the reality in "the happy isles of Oceania".

He describes plenty of photogenic Pacific islands, including the famous ones which have become part of the legend of the Pacific, so you may even see glimpses of the lost Eden painted by Gauguin and described almost rapturously by Bougainville and other early explorers.

Most of the time, however, you may find your dearest illusions about these "happy isles" shattered. Theroux's title is deliberate and ironic.

The islands are still lovely and there is plenty of travelogue stuff, too, of course. Theroux is, after all, moving though some breathtakingly alluring scenery in Oceania. Moreover, he generally rises to the challenge of exhilarating landscape without the purple prose of lesser travel writers.

Theroux is not, however, a conventional traveller. He may indeed fly a jumbo jet to get to his destination and even (occasionally) stay in five-star hotels. If you're most interested in this aspect of travel, you'll love his account of the sinfully self-indulgent hotel lifestyle in the US$2,500-a-day Orchid Bungalow at the Mauna Lani Resort. (This is the same place which has featured in the TV series on the "livestyle of the rich and famous".)

But this is not really what *The Happy Isles of Oceania* is about. Theroux, more often than not, is camping out in his tent on a common beach, cooking a pot of noodles and making his own tea. A boiled egg and an apple are just about luxuries on his holiday.

Another thing which makes a travel book by Theroux very different is the way the whole voyage is held together: the threads which run through the narrative make the factual moving around take on novelistic significance. On this level, Theroux's constant theme in *The Happy Isles of Oceania* is the state of mind he himself feels at different points of his travelogue.

He starts his journey close to despair, with his personal life falling apart and the fear that he could be dying of cancer. The trip to Oceania will take him away from all this, he hopes, so repeatedly during this journey there is a sense that he is

running away, away from all the weariness of a world "too much with us".

One may think that the islands of the Pacific are in fact pretty far away from it all, but what drives Theroux in *The Happy Isles of Oceania* is the desire for complete and perfect isolation. The final desert island is his true destination, a place where the inessentials seem to fall away.

There is an intense but simple thrill in setting off in the morning ... knowing that everything you need is on your back. It is a confidence ... of entering a world of natural beauty which has not been violated, where money has no value, and possessions are a deadweight. The person with the fewest possessions is the freest.

On these occasions - and there are many, many of them interspersed through his journey across Oceania - the simplicity of his prose wonderfully mirrors the simplicity of his life: "My days were sunny and pleasant. My nights were luminous with stars," he writes near the end of his voyage, camping out on yet another lonely beach.

It should not surprise us that Theroux's preferred way of travel is also unusual. Remember his now-famous railway journeys across three continents? This time his mode of travel is even more amazing - kayaking through the islands of the Pacific.

He tells us at the end of the book that he made landfall on 51 Pacific islands, from the biggies ("Meganesia") of Australia and New Zealand to the tiniest dot of coral atoll mere metres above the rolling surf and rocky islets with sheer cliff walls.

Calling *The Happy Isles of Oceania* a travel book is probably an injustice because it does so much more. Travel writers are concerned narrowly with hotels, cuisine, night life, the local sights, and a few phrases in the local pidgin to get by. That sort of thing is satirised by Theroux in a little skit on Ted and his wife Binky, who are on the Hawaiian island of Kauai "covering some hotels" for a newspaper back home.

Readers familiar with Theroux's travel books will be expecting the unexpected, then, in the *The Happy Isles of Oceania* Theroux will not disappoint them. He has interjected many socio-anthropological remarks on the unhappy state of things he finds in the midst of great natural beauty, everywhere in Oceania. He is at his wittiest here, lacing his narrative with acidic comments on people (including quite a few VIPS who unwisely talk to him) and the many varied places he visits (from Perth and Honolulu, unpeopled and waterless little islands, where he is in all likelihood the first white visitor).

He reserves his sharpest remarks for exploitation of many hues (political, historical, economic, racial, tourist, nuclear, environmental), not only for the perpetrators of such crimes, but ironically for the "victims" who won't get off lightly either.

Looked at any way, this is a full-bodied book: it is for you? I have found through informally polling readers of Theroux books (travel, novels and short stories) that one is either completely turned on or completely turned off by this author's - style? manner? matter? Relatively few readers have a neutral reaction to a Theroux work.

So you'll have to ask yourself if you could be part of the large band of Theroux fans who love him. But assuming you've

enjoyed *The Great Railway Bazaar, The Old Patagonian Express* and *Riding the Iron Rooster,* you will be thoroughly enthralled by *The Happy Isles of Oceania.*

RESURRECTION OF A TELLER OF TALES

In Search of Tusitala: Travels in the Pacific after Robert Louis Stevenson
by Gavin Bell

Pub: Picador
No. of pages: 321

Review by Agnes Yeow
31 August 1996 *New Straits Times*

The Thomas Cook Travel Book Award is, I suppose, considered the "Booker" of travel books. It is undoubtedly a prestigious prize in its recognition of the genre's literary significance and that of its best exponents. (And where would we be without traveller's cheques?) Vikram Seth is a "Cook-er" winner and other past recipients include seasoned traveller-writer Paul Theroux.

Last year's winner is the subject of this review. Not a bad achievement at all for a first book by a journalist with a vested passion for being in foreign places, an "inveterate wanderer" as he labels himself. In this, he is vindicated. Bell was for almost two decades a foreign correspondent with Reuters and later, "The Times", plying the news-hungry world with tidings of discomfort and pain occasioned by war-torn Beirut, Afghanistan, Angola and other turbulent, newsworthy areas. More than sixty countries later and after innumerable *coups d'etat* and guerilla activity, he decides he has ducked enough bullets and seen enough Ramboesque action. Off to the South Sea islands he goes in the

wake of his fellow Scotsman, that equally "inveterate" teller of tales, spinner of yarns, weaver of magic and channel of the Muses, Robert Louis Stevenson: *Tusitala,* which means "writer of tales" in Samoan.

I like Bell's approach to the journey ahead of him. His persona is superstitious, romantic and given to sentimental reverie. Far-fetched as it may sound, he is "guided" by the blithe spirit of Stevenson himself or so he may influence the impressionable reader to believe. The prose reads as a journal much as his famous mentor a century before him had kept a record of his island-hopping and Pacific adventures. From the atolls and archipelagos of Oceania, Stevenson had despatched his South Sea "Letters" to his New York publisher for syndicated serialisation in the British and American press. These same letters were subsequently published posthumously in the volume "In the South Seas" which Bell seems to have memorised thoroughly and which he consults with a passion bordering on devotion. It is implicitly established from the outset that "In Search of Tusitala" is a paean to RLS and a personal tribute to the Scottish heritage of both men.

To be sure, the idea for the trip was not conceived as a bolt from the blue. The thought to retrace Stevenson's pelagic route had been floating in Bell's mind for a long while but remained a nebulous notion until certain "promptings" (some of them apparently from beyond) brought the dream to fruition. The reader is apt to sense that the traveller in Bell's account hankers after a "ghostly" companion. Stevenson's "spirit" is constantly invoked and acknowledged, not in a metaphorical sense but as a benign, supernatural presence. The book ends rather "spookily". The traveller is at the grave of Stevenson atop Mount Vaea in Western Samoa mourning its occupant's "restless spirit" when

uncannily, "an exuberant, impish gust ... played briefly around the tomb; and then as suddenly as it came, it was gone". The feeling one gets here as elsewhere in the book is not the heebiejeebies but rather a curiously gratifying impression of a narrator who makes no "bones" about his beliefs. Here is a person who has witnessed the savagery of war first-hand (and thus knows the awful and tangible truth of humanity's ills) transported to a remote place, Stevenson's "haunt", and seeking refuge in the saner, more peaceful realm of the invisible and the ethereal.

Consequently, Bell's journalistic slant teeters on the verge of the paranormal. The reportage may appear "objective" in its evaluation of present-day realities and personalities in the South Seas but looming large over the world depicted in the narrative is the omnipresent Stevenson. Bell may protest his scepticism insofar as visitors from Hades are concerned but his tale turns his argument on its own head. About to take off on a disaster-prone flight to Butaritari in the Gilbert Islands, he appeals to Stevenson for a safe journey. "I am not superstitious by nature, but a wee supplication to RLS had not gone amiss in the past, notably during my helicopter flight in a Marquesan rainstorm. So as we gathered speed down the runway, I quietly suggested to him that fair weather would be appreciated. Evidently our communications were excellent, because we had a relatively smooth flight and after about an hour Butaritari came into view off the port wing." In more than one sense, this book is a "seance" recalling the spirit of Stevenson and Bell makes the perfect medium.

I discovered the flip side of travel books while reading Bell's prize-winning baby: you're never in a hurry to get to the end simply because the "traditional" denouement expected in fiction is immaterial and redundant in this case. One saunters at a

leisurely pace from place to place affirming the adage that it is the journey itself that matters and not the destination. Neverthless, nowhere else is the linear, temporal sequencing of events and situations more imperative than in the *recit de voyage*. In the end, we realise that the actual story of the journey lies in the act of telling it which in itself is a form of journeying, metaphorically speaking, that is. The story of telling a story, if you like. Reading the book, turning and touring the pages, is also a kind of travelling. The symbolism is clinched when we arrive at the final resting place of Tusitala found in the concluding pages: the classic idea of death as the inevitable culmination of life's journey. At the venerated site of Stevenson's remains, the pilgrim Bell, the traveller-reader, and the vagabond RLS himself stand and regard each other and the parallel odysseys that have taken place.

It seems that the Western fantasy of discovering Eden in the Pacific Islands still lives on. Cook, Bougainville, Melville, Gauguin and Rupert Brooke had one thing in common. All believed they had glimpsed the Paradise of myth and literature in the South Sea Islands. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Tahitis, Hawaiis and Samoas of fact and fiction were no longer the utopia and arcadia of the imagination represented in real and invented travels by navigators, men of letters and scientists (both amateur and professional). These pristine, Elysian islands were actual, geographical places inhabited by "human" societies, viz. mainly "savages", "naked cannibals" and erotic women. The point is that these enchanting, distant places already existed in the literary world even before their official discovery and inclusion in the "known", competitive world of the colonising powers. It is perhaps akin to Adam's dream: awakening to find the dream a reality and the desire fulfilled. Although ethnographic and

empirical knowledge of the Islands expanded thenceforth, much of the South Seas still remains an *idea* and an *idealisation*.

The popular theme of "white man bewitched by the beauty of the Islands bewails the passing of the golden age of the South Seas" is as much a literary commonplace today as it was in the days of Melville. Bell is yet another enamoured, concerned voice. Polynesia appears to be an endangered Paradise.

This, however, is not to say that "In Search of Tusitala" is trite. Bell may lament the deracination of peoples and cultures but his focus is unwaveringly RLS and his Scottish identity. Admittedly, his valorisation of RLS and nostalgia for the home country are at times wearisome. In the *lava-lava* (wrap-around clothcostume of the natives) he finds an unlikely cousin to the kilt and in an Irish sea dog called Ormes, proprietor of the decrepit RLS Hotel on Abemama in the Gilberts, he was pleased to find a passing resemblance to RLS himself in his "lean frame and general aspect". Even the landscape in some places transport him right home: " My antipathy towards the Marquesas gradually faded. The longer I stayed, the more I was reminded of the Western Isles of Scotland; the harsh landscapes and rough seas, the turbulent histories, the insular character of the people. At first they seemed withdrawn and wary of strangers, but treated with courtesy and respect they showed the same generosity of spirit I had known in Hebridean crofting communities". Is it a coincidence that Stevenson had "reached the same conclusion" years ago? Or has Stevenson been resurrected in the "tusitala" called Bell?

ROMANCING THE EAST

In Search of Conrad
by Gavin Young

Pub: Penguin
No. of pages: 308

Review by Margaret Yong
3 April 1993 *New Straits Times*

Gavin Young has an amusing story to tell about how he looked for the grave of the Englishman buried in Bidadari Cemetery in 1916, who provided Conrad with the prototype for his novel *Lord Jim*.

Scrambling around the overgrown cemetery with Stephen de Souza of the Singapore Ministry of the Environment as his guide, Young starts to explain about the "real Lord Jim". De Souza has never heard of Joseph Conrad, the novel, or anyone by the name of "Jim" (whether a 'Lord" or otherwise) in those parts (Bidadari Cemetery, long disused, was weed- and possibly snake-infested by the 1980s when Young conducted his search).

However, de Souza does remember the feature film based on Conrad's novel, though not the name of the actor: "Who was the actor now?" he asks Young.

> *"Peter O'Toole," I answered, Ecstatic, he grasped me by the hand: "Peter O'Toole! Now we know what we're*

looking for - the grave of Peter O'Toole! We'll try all the harder to find the tomb, Mr Young!"

As we know, Peter O'Toole lives happily in Hampstead and is in no danger of being buried in Bidadari. *In Search of Conrad* has many such lighter moments, and de Souza is only one of numerous colourful figures who accompany Young on his Conradian searches.

One of the most gorgeous is Tomi, the translator Young takes with him to Bangka Island (off the coast of Sumatra), who turns out to be a balletomane whose claims to English are exhausted by 'yes" and "thank you".

Another unforgettable character is Dr Carl Bundt, collector of marine animals, living in Makassar with his shells (exquisite but deadly cones from the reef: if you stepped on a live cone, "You'd be dead in five hours," he tells Young triumphantly).

Then there is Princess What-for of Sengkang, "the very epitome of Wajo Bugis culture", who keeps her extensive family tree on a disintegrating piece of paper. How did she come by her name? Ah, her story is one of the pleasures of Young's charming book.

Plenty of local colour, then, and an anecdotal style provide a spanking pace and interesting change of scene, as Young tracks Conrad through Southeast Asia.

He quotes Conrad liberally, and mixes the fictional with the actual in a dizzying fashion. Amazingly, this approach works so that the places and people he visits seem to take on a double

identity, and your head is filled with questions like: Did A.P.Williams ever read about "himself" in *Lord Jim*? Is that the very house which trapped Almayer (of the *Folly*) or Olmeijer (employed in the Berau office of Lingard & Co for 30 years)? What would Syed Abdullah Al Joofree (who owned the *Vidar* on which Conrad served) have though of his fictional namesake?

As a young master mariner in the merchant navy, Teodor Josep Konrad Korzeniowski (before he became Joseph Conrad, master novelist) had sailed the straits and seas of the archipelago from the Gulf of Siam to the Malacca, Sunda and Makassar Straits. He discovered great trading cities like Bangkok, Surabaya and Singapore, as well as little outposts like Muntok on Bangka Island, near which he was shipwrecked.

Young faithfully journeyed through the same waters, first in 1977 on a beautiful sailing boat, the *Fiona*, and then in 1988 in whatever ship would give him a birth. Usually this meant a cargo ship or a local ferry like the *Mauru III*, plying between Sulawesi and the east coast of Kalimantan, whose captain agreed to take him as one of a hundred deck passengers.

While Young was never in any real danger on these unorthodox cruises, the numerous ships met with along the way give his account a distinctly nautical air: one feels that Conrad might have been pleased.

The authentic atmosphere of sea, wind and sky will stir memories of the *Vidar,* the *Palestine*, the *Sissie*, the *Otago* and the *Melita* - Conrad's ships when he sailed around these eastern shores. Now, ships are very nice and visiting exotic Bugis kingdoms with an eminent author even nicer, but if you don't

care for such things, what then What does Young have to offer then

In Search of Conrad is the story of a personal quest, filled with the spirit of adventure, but, or course, it is ultimately the Conradian ghosts haunting these waterways which make this an extraordinary travelogue. Does this mean that if you haven't read Conrad (and don't care to), *In Search of Conrad* will lose its pungency?

On the contrary, Young's infectious enthusiasm may tempt you to try some Conrad.

What Young has done is much more than mere detective work, of the sort which asks, "Where is the grave of A.P.Williams?" or "Who were the descendants of the great trading family, the Al Joofrees?" (The answer to that, incidentally, is they are still on the Berau and the Bulungan, as well as in Singapore and Johor Baru; and if you think your ancestry includes an Arabic Al Joofree, you may want to read Young/Conrad for this reason alone). What Young has done most all is to extend (to 'popularise', if that word appeals to you) the Conradian idea of the East.

Conrad's Eastern novels can certainly be constructed as his romance with the region: remember those hypnotic rhythms with which his romancing begins in "*Youth*?

> *And this is how I see the East. I have seen its secret places and have looked into its very soul ...*

Like Conrad, Young feels the mesmerising power of the East on those men in ships, who (said Conrad) "have tinged with romance the region of shallow waters and forest-clad islands that

lie far east and still mysterious between the deep waters of two oceans".

In Search of Conrad may persuade you to look anew at the East (where we live, after all). You never know, you may see reflected from the gleaming glass and concrete towers, which have replaced the Victorian cities of Conrad's time, the ghosts of another era mingling with their modern descendants.

MEDITERRANEAN ODYSSEY

The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean
by Paul Theroux

Publisher: Penguin
No. of pages: 523

Review by Agnes Yeow
14 September 1996 *New Straits Times*

Theroux has done it again: ruffle a great plumage of feathers around the globe and undoubtedly bringing his popularity ratings among his traversed subjects down to an abysmal all-time low. Nevertheless, he still remains one of my favourite travel writers for all his cynicism and acerbic wit. One may deplore his penchant for summing up racial characteristics at one fell swoop ("The Spanish are both very polite and very curious, an awkward combination of traits, and so they have developed an economical and yet piercing way of eavesdropping, an unintrusive way of being nosy.") but when he begins to rail against the gory senselessness of bullfighting as a national pastime, animal lovers the world over will be apt to laud his voluble tirade.

Which leads me to surmise that whether you love or hate him depends entirely on the point of view taken by the addresser, addressee and addressed. If you were a member of the addressed group being impugned and being accused of all sorts of contemptible folly, then you may find the rhetoric deeply objectionable. However, if you were an outsider with little or no experience of the place and people being described (fairly or

unfairly), then chances are your empathies will not be severely challenged. If, on the other hand, you were Theroux's eyes and you were merely passing through (an ambiguous pretext) and recording your sincere reactions to events, situations, individuals, and other things encountered during your journey, then you might wonder what the dickens is all the fuss and rage about.

Theroux's animated style strikes me as having come into its own. There's meat here enough for the armchair traveller travelling vicariously as well as for critics, fans and detractors alike. Academics studying the discourse of new "conquests" and the literariness of travel prose will go to town analysing the latest book of an unstoppable and acclaimed world traveller. Is there any place on earth yet unvisited and unappropriated by the peripatetic author? The answer to that is a resounding 'ayes". This book will certainly not be Theroux's last and I honestly hope so. His maxim seems to be "have space, will travel". As such, he is not likely to cease wandering and writing about his experiences till he has covered every square inch of this lonely planet. One should then query: Is any place safe from the withering scrutiny of this man?

Be that as it may, this book is an engrossing read, in Jan Morris's words: "...a terrific book, full of fun as well as anxiety, of vivid characters and curious experiences--perhaps the best of all Theroux's travel books". I don't know if this is Theroux's best but it reflects a maturity and sensitivity which I found immensely gratifying. This is a gem of a Mediterranean Grand Tour linking the Rock of Gibraltar with its southern counterpart in Ceuta, Morocco (all the time hugging the coastline), and I was genuinely sad when it ended, however, as in the words of the writer, "...although the journey was over, the experience wasn't".

There is a sense of real nostalgia and sweetness in the way the mobile speaker of this work discovers new facets about the act of travelling itself. Writers abroad have a propensity for basking in romantic (sometimes fanciful) reverie and revelations about moving through alien landscapes and cultures. Theroux is no exception. In Corsica (where the cult of Napoleon is manifested in the streets, hotels, restaurants and other establishments named after the military dictator), he is overcome by an inexplicable feeling of contentment while on a train: "At the head of the valley looking west from the station of Ponte-Nuovo I saw the snow-capped peak of Monte Asto, and there was nowhere else I wanted to be. Here, now, on this rail car rattling across Corsica under the massive benevolence of this godlike mountain top -- this for the moment was all that mattered to me, and I was reminded of the intense privacy, the intimate whispers, the random glimpses that grant us the epiphanies of travel".

Poetic moments punctuate the text, but so do signature Theroux invectives. The Mediterranean does come across as the enigmatic and mythical seascape evoked by the ancient and advanced civilisations which once thrived along its shores. Nevertheless, it is also depicted as a grubby scene of urban decay and industrial sterility. The main perpetrator of this dereliction is also the bane of any self-respecting travel writer's existence, namely tourism. Ironically, it is precisely tourism, the economic mainstay of much of the region's resorts and ruins, which had launched this Mediterranean jaunt. In line with the conventional style of travel books, the traveller explicitly states his intent and reasons for departure: "1 assumed the whole Mediterranean was...tourism as ancestorworship and the veneration of incoherent ruins. Then I began to think that this was perhaps the best reason for going to see this part of the world, that it was so over-visited it was haunted and decrepit, totally changed. Change

and decay had made it worth seeing and an urgent subject to record. I was the man for it. Half a lifetime of travelling had given me a taste for the macabre".

Despite his aversion for that sub-human and lowlife being called the tourist, Theroux had had to compromise on his "holier-than-thou" position on at least one occasion. At the Mediterranean port of Haifa in Israel while being harassed by brusque security officers, he swallows a bitter pill and claims "immunity" by disguising as a harmless, innocent tourist. To bail himself out of a disagreeable situation, he tells the ultimate lie: "'I'm a tourist"'. 'It hurt me to have to admit that, but I thought generally that tourists got away with murder and that being a tourist was an excuse for any sort of stupidity or clumsiness. You can't do anything to me --I'm a tourist!"

If labels are anything to go by, then Theroux deserves yet another: polyglot. It's simply amazing to realise the fact that he speaks fluent Italian, Spanish and French. At one point of the journey (which is also a pondering aloud over the migratorial trends of Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians, or Northern Africans and Arabs in Europe, and their social and linguistic adaptation or conversely their resistance to change), this multilingual tourist offers his theory of language acquisition: ". no language is difficult. Language is an activity, a kind of play, learned through practice. It requires little intelligence. It is social". En route to Positano near the volcanic ash-engulfed Pompeii, the spectator-traveller experiences yet another illuminating episode concerning language, this time afforded by his Sorrentino driver, a man called Nello who had just earned a princely eighty US dollars from the feeling-lavish client: "Nello insisted on speaking English. He claimed he wanted practice. But that was another thing about travel in a luxurious way: the more

money you had, the more regal your progress, the greater the effort local people made to ingratiate themselves and speak English. I had not known that money helped you off the linguistic hook".

In the final analysis, much of this book is about ordinary people in ordinary places leading equally unextraordinary lives. For Theroux, the Mediterranean is a trove of questionable relics on permanent exhibition to the rest of the world. Its attraction for him lies not so much in the obvious monuments or artifacts but in the inhabitants who eke out a living among these antiquities. "I was thinking of an aspect of Mediterranean travel that was like museum-going, the shuffling, the squinting, the echoes, the dust, the dubious treasures. You were supposed to be reverential. But even in the greatest museums I had been distracted and found myself gazing out of the windows at traffic or trees, or at other museum-goers, places like this were always the haunt of lovers on rainy Sundays. Instead of pictures, I often looked at the guards, the men or women in chairs at the entrances to rooms, the way they stifled yawns, their watchful eyes, their badges. No museum guard ever resembles a museum-goer, and my Mediterranean was like that." This, to my mind, is a fair summation of the mood and tenor of one man's visit to one of the biggest museums and tourist playgrounds in the world, a trip which is also an exercise in eavesdropping, note-taking, even voyeurism in the sense of furtively observing the private, sometimes disgusting behaviour of humanity.

This particular voyage is also interesting in its attempt to map the sea and its environs with the aid of a rather archaic and arcane guide: the epics of Homer and Virgil. If you like, Theroux is a modern-day Ulysses playing at charting unknown territory, excitedly matching topographical descriptions in the

classic text of *Odyssey* to actual geographical locations. "The art in Homer's lines still precisely reflected nature." Does Theroux's art precisely mirror Mediterranean mortals?

A SECRET ONE MUST DISCOVER FOR ONESELF

The Hundred Secret Senses
by Amy Tan

Pub: Flemingo
No. of pages: 321

Review by Neil Khor Jin Keong
22 May 1996 *New Straits Times*

Olivia Bishop Laguni Yee contemplates which surname to assume after deciding to end her marriage. In the fluidity of Amy Tan's fiction, this simple decision takes her from her San Francisco home to the rugged inner depths of mainland China.

Tan not only questions Olivia's identity but breaks the boundaries of reality to achieve the answer. Wedged somewhere in the subconscious is the hundred secret senses that we have forgotten we have. Regaining the secret senses is the solution to Olivia's identity crisis.

The Hundred Secret Senses is about Olivia's search for meaning, cosmic alliance and inner peace. He tranquillity is broken by Kwan, her half-sister from China. Kwan is awkward, unsophisticated and regarded as a bull in a china shop; above all, she is absolutely Chinese. Kwan's arrival highlights for Olivia her "condition" as Chinese-American. However, it is Kwan's claim to be able to communicate with the dead that leaves an enduring mark in Olivia's life.

Secret Senses, like Tan's first novel *The Joy Luck Club*, is equally concerned with human relationships, and Tan is still an expert at exploiting the Chinese-American complex, but she takes it a step further by including past lives in her growing list of human concerns. Yet from this point of view, there is little that is edifying about *Secret Senses* in comparison with *Joy Luck*.

What is innovative here is the invoking of the *yin* world or the world of the departed (Tan prefers the politically correct term *yin* people, conjured through Kwan and her *yin*-eyes.) *Secret Senses* offers a refreshingly original alternative to the usual Judeo-Christian doctrine of Original Sin to explain humankind's condition on earth.. It is an intersection between reality as we know it and the reality that comes from our allowing our "secret senses" to dictate our vision.

Kwan tells Olivia that the hundred secret senses give us the ability to be sensitive towards things other than ourselves, to be true to ourselves. It is an ability that comes naturally to children and is comparable to a cat feeling with its whiskers. It gets forgotten in the process of living and is rediscovered at the point of death.

Through Kwan (the symbolic) and Olivia (the factual), Tan is able to draw two opposing visions of life together and reconcile them. Thus we find Kwan transcending space and time. She is a Hakka warrior in the Taiping Rebellion, a servant girl to an American missionary, Miss Banner, and a dead soul occupying the body of Buncake, her childhood friend in China.

Olivia, on the other hand, is a photographer. She is used to treating life as a photograph, still and unchanging. Though

she finds refuge in her work, she is destined to make a journey back to China when she realises that her surname is not Yee after all. In searching for her true family name, she indirectly has to rediscover who she is.

Though Kwan and Olivia seem irreconcilable, they are as inextricably linked as they are sisters. This I believe is a reflection of what Tan thinks is the meaning of being Chinese-American. It is the forging of two opposing selves. For Tan, being Chinese is as important as being American.

Secret Senses is captivating because it surprises the reader at each new bend. A new idea and a new explanation makes each page a new discovery. Kwan has bizarre explanations for things we would not even think about. She explains that the overpopulation of Chinese and Indians is caused by the good food that the two cultures are famous for.

Typical of immigrants, Kwan clings to material things, Chinese folklore and delicacies for an identity. Olivia, however, does not find clinging to the same things Kwan does to be a solution to her quest for identity. She has to go to China to get away from the overwhelming presence of America and things American. It is in China that reconciliation and the merging of the Chinese and the American is possible for Olivia.

Kwan is the bearer of secrets and Olivia the captive of the same secrets. Together with their hundred secret senses, they arrive at an understanding of each other, themselves, their relationship, and their place in life. It is a moment where Amy Tan achieves a unity of being. A secret moment in the novel that each reader must discover of herself.

LIFE'S BUT A WALKING SHADOW ...

The Shadow Man
by John Katzenbach

Pub: Warner Books
No. of pages: 529

Review by Neil Khor Jin Keong

The Shadow Man is riveting, simply because it is easy to identify with. The urban reality that dominates our existence is John Katzenbach's most powerful weapon. The terror of vandalism, intrusion, and the inescapable fact that we are all prisoners in our own homes are effectively exploited.

The novel exposes how shallow that existence is, how madness is constantly threatening to pull away the cloak of civilisation we so desperately cling to, and how pure evil can exist seemingly invisible and invincible in our midst.

No one in the novel realizes this more than Simon Winter. Retired from the police force, Winter, like his surname suggests, exists in a cold, isolated world. He attempts suicide but a knock on the door by another terrified senior citizen diverts his attention. He decides to die another day.

This knock is a significant link between all the characters in the novel. All of them are immigrants in this Miami community of Jews escaping the terrors of the Holocaust, African

Americans trying to escape the oppression of poverty, and the Cubans escaping the tyranny of Castro's regime.

The only oppressor they cannot escape from is The Shadow Man.

With *The Shadow Man*, Katzenbach gives death a name, a personality and a face. Der Schattenmann as he is known in German, is a Jewish "catcher" during the Second World War. According to Frieda Kroner, a survivor, "... if he saw you, then you died. If you heard his voice, then you died. If he touched, then you died ..."

Having survived the Allied invasion of Berlin, The Shadow Man stalks the survivors who escaped him in the war, and kills them one by one, blaming each crime on the violence of our modern society.

When Sophie Millstein recognises him after 50 years, she hurries to Simon Winter, saving the old detective from suicide, and tells him what she knows. Then death visits Sophie Millstein. And from his point onwards, the reader is glued to the action and the fast-paced deductions of Winter and Robinson, the young homicide detective investigating Sophie's murder.

Riddles emerge. Does The Shadow Man really exist? Is he merely fragments of memory put together by ailing minds? More importantly, is The Shadow Man a symbol of our inescapable meeting with death?

In the novel, the question of who will die next does not arise. It is how and when they will die that matter. Like the

past, The Shadow Man had become a part of the lives of these characters. The more they struggle to free themselves, the stronger he seems to get.

Robinson realises the futility of trying to escape The Shadow Man and his past as he stares at the mutilated body of the latter's latest victim: "He looked over the body and thought: No matter how far you travel away from this, it will always be there. It was like staring into a nightmare ..."

The implication, Katzenback suggests, is not to try and avoid death or the past. In other words, can we instead stare death in the eye and defy The Shadow Man? Can we survive looking into our own darkness? Or do we go on living in the shadows of our own insecurities?

Reading *The Shadow Man*, we can't really distinguish our urban existence from that flicker of madness that was World War Two. It is like living in a great shadow; we too are hunted, we too are merely shadows living on borrowed time.

It's a riveting experience.

WEBS OF LOVE AND LIFE

Life in the Woods and Other Stories
by Ari Gorodietski

Pub: Times Books International

Review by Surinderpal Kaur Ramana

Racism, drugs and violence in America are some of the elements that are starkly portrayed in this collection of short stories. As a young second-generation American Jew during the late 1960s, Gorodietski writes of the "not so beautiful America".

The seven stories (plus one screenplay) in this volume seem like certain incidents and events from the lives of his characters rather than actual stories. Diverse as these incidents are, they are united through Gorodietski's thoughts about love and relationships - relationships that are almost always affected by people's perceptions of race, colour, religion, education and class.

In *Adventures with ... Marilyn and Diane*, Stanley, the protagonist searches for the perfect relationship with first Marilyn, a fellow Jew and then with Diane, a beautiful but pompous bigot. Both these relationships end disastrously as feelings of racial superiority or inferiority get in the way. People's inability and even fear of communicating with each other form the crux of this rather unsettling two-part story.

In *Cafe Lorenzo*, the next story however, Stanley discovers that people of different creed and colour with only a liking for Billie Holliday in common, can actually communicate with each other if only like ships passing in the night.

The search for a "pure" relationship leads Gorodietski into writing *Dance in the Rain*, a tender tale of a budding relationship which is as yet untainted by any overtones of "religion, class, education, race or any other such externals." Gorodietski tries to maintain an unspoiled feeling throughout this story and does succeed to a certain extent.

Anne, unlike some of the other characters in this volume, is refreshingly uninhibited and unafraid of exposing herself, both literally and figuratively. One senses a certain exhilarating freedom in this story which cannot fail to affect the reader.

The last story in this collection, *With Affection, Walter*, deals with teenage problems and feelings.

The author's daughter calls this a "real" story and I am inclined to agree. Inspired by the letters of a young cousin, this story is a series of letters written to young Louise by her various friends. Wry and amusing at times, it shows the painful uncertainties of adolescence especially when it comes to relationships and the beginning of sexual awareness. Some of the readers will certainly be able to relate to the feelings and emotions evoked in Louise by some of the letters.

According to Gorodietski, this book is aimed at old-fashioned readers who search for "small press editions they feel will provide some of life's answers."

Life in the Woods and Other Stories does not exactly provide answers to life's ambiguities. It does however, detail the author's reactions to what he perceives as the narrow-mindedness of the American society. Having spent most of his earlier life "bouncing" around the world, he is sickened by the widespread violence and racial intolerance which is worsened by the American preoccupation with money and power.

In the semi-autobiographical story, *Life in the Woods*, Gorodietski writes of a 20-something writer who chooses to escape from the madness of the `herd-instinct' activism of New York and decides to live in the woods *a la* Henry David Thoreau.

Like Thoreau, he wishes to find a kind of purity in life, a life that is distanced from "kids, mad dogs and pickled widows" Although lonely and isolated at first, he does find a sort of spiritual kinship to all living things.

He discovers however, that even in the woods, he cannot escape racism and violence. In some hunters and policemen, he encounters again the threat of human irrationality and racial violence.

Like this writer, Gorodietski too is disillusioned by America and finds that he can no longer live there. In a self-imposed exile, he now lives in Denmark, a country which he feels has a more peaceful and relatively open society.

Gorodietski's writing is not very comfortable to read. Often tinged with a hard-edged desperateness, it can get too intense at times. As an account of human irrationality, *Life in the Woods and Other Stories* although exhausting at times, is an interesting read.

MOVED BY MAGIC AND MUSIC

Baroque Concerto
by Alejo Carpentier
Translated by Asa Zatz
Foreward by Carlos Fuentes

Pub: Andre Deutsch
No. of pages: 121

Review by Lim Chee Seng

EVERY *tourist who* has known the desperate rush for the next and nearest toilet knows of the curse of Montezuma's revenge. This is a novel to erase the nastiness of Montezuma's revenge and to put in its place a splendid Montezuma reincarnation in the musical imagination of the West.

The Baroque period in the history of art was, of course, deeply interested in movement and energy, and the movement from revenge to reincarnation takes a supreme feat of creative imagination to pull off.

The novel of Cuban Alejo Carpentier begins in a shimmering parade of silver and a percussive noise of the master pissing into the silver chamber-pot accompanied by the servant doing likewise into a clay urinal.

With this beginning in mind, one might be led to note the building up of a respectable minor tradition of scatological beginnings in the Latin American novel, a kind of starting at the

end. Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera is* an analogue close in time and space to Carpentier's novel.

Joyce's *Ulysses* also has Leopold Bloom at the jakes close to the beginning of the novel. Like Joyce's masterpiece, it comes soon to a scatological function; like *Ulysses,* it is a brilliant novel. Unlike *Ulysses,* the story ranges over many ages. *Ulysses is* a long novel about one day; ***Baroque Concerto*** is a short one which spans centuries.

Carpentier's *tour de force* depicts Western civilisation through the eyes *and* ears of a wealthy Mexican nobleman on his Grand Tour of 18th-century Europe who disguises himself as Montezuma in Venice.

The glorious Baroque music of Vivaldi, Handel and Scarlatti can be heard in this novel. Vivaldi's opera *Montezuma,* in particular, evokes the military triumph of Europe over the New World as it celebrates the defeat of the Mexican King by Cortes.

The Portuguese, exploring and conquering eastwards, made little impression on the cultures they encountered there.

The Spanish, on the other hand, had tremendous success in the West, and Latin America is today's turbulent and bustling measure of that triumph.

This success is, more than anything else, focused in the conquest of Mexico under Montezuma by Hernan Cortes.

Much is known about Cortes in spite of his murky years in Hispaniola or little Spain (Haiti) and Cuba. If we believe the

testimony of the Dominican missionary Bartolome de Las Casas, who took part in the conquest of Cuba, there must have been much atrocity in the campaign against the Cubans.

He reports that many native Cubans hanged themselves together with their families in order to escape the worst of the atrocities. That Cortes took this trail of atrocity is well-attested in contemporary accounts like that of Las Casas.

Montezuma the king is by comparison shrouded in mystery. It is this mystery which Carpentier's novel seeks to enter in an attempt to understand fully how in penetrating Latin America, Spain and the Spanish language were also enclosed in its embrace. Penetration and enclosure are integral parts of one experience.

We have Carlos Fuentes' authority expressed in the foreword to the novel that "the sum of Carpentier's work is, indeed, a magnificent verbal cathedral, one of the grand structures of the Spanish language in our century."

"Carpentier's vision of the historical narrative" is praised by Fuentes for its "cannibalisation of history" which amounts to "a joyous plea in favour of a history we make ourselves".

Fuentes examines the power of Carpentier's prose in its going back to the earliest sources in the diaries of explorers and the chronicles of conquest.

"This was a language that could just as effectively embrace the marvellous as the commonplace—mermaids swimming in the Antilles and miners mining in Potosi, the overthrowing of

empires and the cultivation of maize, Amazons with one breast and Leviathans with three."

Here is the source of the much-mentioned "magic realism". Carpentier himself had talked of the "marvellous reality" of a place where "the unusual is a daily occurrence". It is when the Old World engages with the New that reality is revitalised by dream and the mundane is touched by magic.

These feats of imagination recall the baroque vistas which are actually painted murals, the garden benches which will actually shower the resting passersby with water.

The stone of Baroque sculpture and architecture actually moves ("the ceiling of the theatre where pink pipers of an angelical chorus perhaps from Tiepolo's brushes, flew, frozen in transit.") and that most formless of all elements, water, is in baroque fountains notionally shaped into fixed form.

The Baroque movement of Europe is clearly an excellent vehicle for magic realism, for the marriage of magic and reality. In Carpentier's novel gravestones in a Venetian cemetery look like tables in a vast, empty cafe with their cloths off.

"Montezuma", Handel and Vivaldi breakfast on one of these stones and the idea for the opera of Montezuma springs to life in the place of death.

As the Mexican tells the story of Montezuma to the composer he is carried away.

Gesture and voice fill the narrative and he becomes possessed by the characters. The mask becomes the man -18th-century Mexican aristocrat becomes 16th-century Aztec emperor.

More baroque twists are unravelled. Vivaldi looks at a gravestone and finds engraved on it and under it, IGOR STRAVINSKY.

Handel and Vivaldi proceed to comment on the work of this 20th-century composer with the "very traditional" approach and the tired "antiquated" subjects! If only the anachronism would stay still but the dry bones of the Russian come to life to quote the music of Handel and to rubbish the concertos of Vivaldi. And passing by in a funereal gondola is Wagner who died yesterday.

Baroque Concerto gives baroque art a new and fresh flourish when Louis Armstrong "utterly transforms" Handel's *Messiah* in the theatre where Vivaldi's *Montezuma is* playing. Baroque music slides into modern jazz, the New World into the Old.

In the invocation of Louis Armstrong and the merging of jazz and baroque oratorio, Carpentier figures forth the true connection of the New World with the Old, one that sweeps aside all barriers to come together in art.

Baroque Concerto is not an easy novel to read but it is one that bountifully rewards our efforts with the joys of the imagination.

WHEN PARADISE IS HELL

Paradise
by Abdul Razak Gurnah

Pub: Penguin
No. of pages: 247

Review by Looi Slew Teip
28 June 1995 *New Straits Times*

PARADISE is on the surface a straightforward *bildungsrotnan* set in Tanzania (or Tanganyika as it was known then) during the German colonial period, but at its very heart lies a thought-provoking examination or the condition of the slave and the nature of freedom.

The story is told entirely from Yusuf's point of view and the spare, simple, but by no means inarticulate prose of the opening chapters very aptly mirrors the blissful innocence of the 12 year old at home in his village, looking forward to the customary handout from a regular visitor whom he knows as Uncle Aziz.

Yusuf, led to believe that he is merely accompanying his Uncle Aziz on a train journey down to the coast, is taken by the rich merchant into his service and set to work in a shop next to his house under the tutelage of Khalil, a young man who had entered the merchant's service in exactly the same way as Yusuf.

It is Khalil who sets the record straight for Yusuf: "You're here because your Ba owes the seyyid money. I'm here because my Ba owes him money ..."

Yusuf's innocence is underscored by his reaction to this piece of information:

Yusuf did not understand all the details, but he could not see that it was wrong to work for Uncle Aziz in order to pay off his father's debt. When he had paid it all off he could then go home. Although perhaps they could have warned him before he left.

The rest of the novel is about Yusuf coming to the conclusion that it *is* wrong and ends with his making an ambiguous bid for freedom.

The state of servility is graphically represented by repeated descriptions of various people grovelling before the merchant to kiss his hand. Yusuf's innocent pleasure at the beginning of the novel as he anticipates Aziz slipping a coin into his hand takes on a different light when viewed against a passage describing the merchant surrounded by his lackeys:

People hurried towards Uncle Aziz as he walked past, to kiss his hand if he would let them or bow their greetings a deferential yard or two away if he appeared unapproachable. He was impassive in the face of the grovelling salutes and prayers, and when he had listened long enough not to seem discourteous, he continued on his way, slipping a handful of coins to the most abject of his courtiers.

Yusuf slips easily into his new life, harbouring no resentment against his father or the merchant, who treats him well enough. He later spends a couple of years in the interior, unaware that he has been sent there by Aziz in order to keep him away from Zulekha. his half-crazed wife who has taken a fancy to the handsome boy.

Yusuf finds his paradise in the merchant's walled garden. It is here that he catches a shadowy glimpse of a young woman, who later turns out to be Amina, Khalil's adopted sister. Khalil's father had sold both of them to the merchant to pay his debts, the agreement being that Khalil was free to go once Amina had reached marriageable age and was married to Aziz. Khalil had stayed on after Amina's marriage in order to look after her and to atone, as he puts it, for his father's unjust treatment of her.

The garden becomes the place for their trysts and it is as he considers Amina's fate that Yusuf realises the injustise of his and Amina's situation. He proposes that they run away, but when Khalil learns of this, he pours scorn on the idea:

She can leave if she wants! Who has stopped you leaving all these years? Where will you go with her? The seyyid will not even need to raise a hand against you. You'll be condemned in the eyes of all people rightly so. A criminal. If you stay in this town, you '11 not even be safe.

Khalil, of course, is right. As Yusuf ruminates bitterly over his situation, the veil of innocence lifts:

He would feel no remorse about his parents, he said to himself. He would not. They had abandoned him yenrs ago to win their own freedom, and now he would abandon them.

If the paradise within the walled garden turns out to be a place of awakening to bitter truths about life, the interior to which Yusuf travels with the merchant on a trading expedition where, it is hinted, lies a shadowy paradise inhabited by noble savages, turns out to be hell.

The trading expedition travels to a remote town presided over by a petty king, Chatu. Along the way, Aziz is obliged to part with a good deal of his goods as tribute to the petty rulers whose domain they pass through, the country becomes more and more inhospitable and they lose four men to illness. When they actually get to Chatu's town, they are set upon and their goods confiscated — Chatu s way Of getting his own back against a trader who had cheated him earlier.

Significantly, it is a German colonial officer who turns up at the scene at this crucial moment and restores some of Aziz s goods to him.

Colonialism is one of the themes of this multi-faceted novel and is of course intimately linked to the subject of freedom. The German colonists are seen as a menacing force appropriating land and other resources with scant regard for the rights of the local inhabitants, destroying traditional patterns of life and circumscribing the freedom of action ot traders like Aziz.

A crisis is precipitated towards the end of the novel when Zulekha, who is by now completely besotted by the handsome young man in Yusuf, insists on seeing him every day while Aziz is away on another trading mission.

One evening, when Zulekha puts a hand on Yusof's shoulder with a "look of passion and longing on her face, he

knows that things have gone far enough and that it is time to beat a hasty retreat.

Like Potiphar's wife, Zulekha, spurned by her Yusuf, cries rape and as the latter contemplates running away from the consequences of the whole affair, he realises that wherever he went, he would be questioned about his background and his intentions, to which he would only be able to give evasive answers:

The seyyid could travel deep into strange lands in a cloud of perfume, armed only with bags of trinkets and a sure knowledge of his superiority. The white man in the forest feared nothing as he sat under his flag, ringed by armed soldiers. But Yusuf had neither a flag nor righteous knowledge with which to claim superior honour and he thought he understood that the small world he knew was the only one available to him.

Hemmed in on all sides and now fully conscious of the indignity of his situation, Yusuf is impelled towards his final, ambiguous gesture. Khalil and Yusuf hide from soldiers who are rounding up people to serve in the German army. When the soldiers leave with their captives, Yusuf comes out to inspect the remains of their temporary encampment. He sees dogs nibbing at several piles of excrement. They look suspiciously at him:

He looked for a moment in astonishment, surprised at this squalid recognition. The dogs had known a shit-eater when they saw one.

This proves to be a devastating and decisive moment of truth. He runs after the retreating column of soldiers, ostensibly to give himself over to serve in the army.

The themes of colonialism and freedom intersect in this final, ambivalent gesture that carries strong ironic overtones. In his despair, Yusuf runs straight into the arms of the cruel, rapacious and ugly colonist, presumably seeing it as the only way out of his hopeless situation.

Abdul Razak Gurnah eschews sentimentality completely in this novel and he does not take it upon himself to engage our sympathies for Yusuf. Yusuf is an endearing character but there is little pathos in his situation because much of the time, he is in a state of blissful ignorance. The truth dawns on him only right at the end and this leads to a swift, ambiguous and thought-provoking conclusion.

A prominent feature of *Paradise*, which was shortlisted for the 1994 Booker Prize, is the lively dialogue that often features earthy language peppered with sexual inuendos that are funny rather than pathological and colourful insults that often have something to do with religion.

The dialogue and the spare but fluid prose frequently support a comic tone that serves as a nice foil to the weighty subject of the book, making this complex novel a pleasure to read, but one that can hardly fail to povoke.

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