David Leo, *Cherry Days*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015. 249 pp. ISBN 978-981-09-6487-0.

Cherry Days, a mix of fiction and memoir, by David Leo is a journey down memory lane. The fiction is largely autobiographical which tries to capture, as the author himself says, "what life was like when I was a child" and adds that he had "retrieved these leaves from yesteryears and constructed a story around my family" (248). The novel begins with the sentence, "The road led to nowhere" (10). Actually, it is this road that leads the reader to the heart of *Cherry Days,* as the author at the end of the chapterobserves: "The road that led to nowhere had been our road to growing up as boys" (22). The title of the story is evocative of the "cherry tree" which serves as a mnemonic device in the fiction. It is the story of the growth of a group of children including the author amidst a rural setting of Singapore in the 1950s. The chapters, mostly titled after the names of major characters, vividly portray the life in a "kampong" (village). Interestingly enough, the chapter-titles refer to the nicknames of most of the characters. This gives the reader the feel of how intimately connected the author-narrator was with the people ofhis neighbourhood. It also suggests the intimate, informal style of narration that the author adopts. The nicknames convey a sense of humour that the author injects into the narrative: "Gila" (mad or crazy), "Four Eyes" (a character with specs) or "Mo-peng" (one with pimply face). The author himself is called "Skinny" because of his lean and thin structure.

As the story moves on, the author deftly weaves threads of personal lives with those of public incidents and events. The dominant symbols in the story are the cherry tree and the haunted house. The author rightly points out that the "cherry tree was our tree of boyish delight, the tree of our growing up" (17). The haunted house, which, in the course of the story, turns from a house of ghosts to a house of secret romance was perhaps a place where the "Japanese soldiers held many people captive… before massacring them in the backyard" of the house during the Japanese occupation of Singapore and Malaya (33). May be it is for this dark history that the house was called the "haunted house." The superstitious kampong people wove various imaginary stories about the house and everybody carefully avoided entry into it. And interestingly enough, the author mentions that the number of the house was "13" (241).

The novel devotes more than half of its chapters, either partly or fully, to women. Apart from the three "Kampong Beauties" (23), there are a variety of women characters who sustain the interest of the readers by their individual idiosyncrasies. In course of the story, the three girls – Lee Choo, Phoenix and Lucy – blossomed into women. Among the three, Lucy was the youngest and also the "most dominant feature" (27) in kampong's topography. While Lucy was gregarious and vain, Lee Choo was obedient to her mother's commands. Phoenix

had the spirit of rebellion in her and during her school days "seldom came home promptly after school because of her many extra-curricular activities" (31). The three girls were different from each other but on Sundays when the three kampong beauties "walked together in their best attire to spend some girlie time together" (31) it was a sight to behold. As the novel proceeds, the three girls chose different paths in their lives. Phoenix was the new woman who fought for gender equality. Even when in school her involvement in the students' movement led to her arrest. Lucy, on the other hand, was all set to live a domestic life as a wife. After having a romantic affair with "Four Eyes" in her adolescence, she finally settled down as the wife of Muko. Lee Choo too, right from her early days, obeyed her mother's commands and chose to be a responsible wife. The remarkable thing about these women was that "all three of them had responded differently to the challenges that confronted the modern woman" (237).

Apart from these women, another woman who is mentioned in the title of as many as six chapters in the novel is "That Woman." Her actual name is not given; she is portrayed as an enigma and till the end of the novel her identity is deliberately kept shrouded. She was not a free mingler and the neighbours also kept her at bay. The author was perhaps a link between "That Woman" and her neighbours.

Most of the women characters in the novel, notwithstanding the different roles they play, exist not to play a second fiddle to the patriarchs. They are all assertive women having agencies of their own. When the time came to accept the transition from the rural life to the urban setting they, in fact, faced no obstacle, psychological or otherwise, to negotiate the change.

The chapters that focus on the author's mother contain passages and statements which can very well be regarded as a tribute to motherhood and at the same time speak of foresightedness of such women. His mother, herself "deprived of formal education," constantly harped on the importance of education. And the narrator pays his tribute by acknowledging that "Our mothers were the real heroines of the kampong" (65).

As the novel deals with the growing up of a whole lot of children it necessarily involves detailed description of various adventures, games and plays which include kite flying, climbing the trees, catching the guppy fishes during the rainy season and venturing into a haunted house. Kite flying was a favourite game of the boys. It was a real kampong fun to watch the battle of the sky. Many "strangers" also used to throng in the "lallang" (a variety of tall grass) field to fly kites. It was a sight to see one kite flyer challenging a rival's kite in flight. Once a kite is cut loose in such a contest many boys chased after it with great enthusiasm.

One very interesting fact about the technique of strengthening kite string was adding the blood of a sparrow as an ingredient to the paste in which the string was dipped. The belief was that this would make the thread even more potent. But the narrator and his seniors did not do this as they believed that killing

an innocent sparrow would cause the death of "one of the parents of the person who slaughtered the bird" (115): "*Kill the sparrow, someone dies. If it's male, your father dies. If it's female, your mother dies*. It was too high a price to pay" (115; emphasis original).

The haunted house instilled a fear psychosis in the minds of the children of the Kampong. But adventurous in nature as the young boys and girls were, they always felt a secret urge to go inside the house to see if there was really anything "ghostly" inside. The first boy who entered the house was Mo-peng. He went inside to retrieve a ball which accidentally propelled through the half-open window of the house. But after coming out, he did not say a word about his experience. Besides, after that incident he kept himself confined in the house "purportedly because he was not feeling well" (146). The speculation among the boys was that he "might have been cursed for venturing into the haunted house" (146). Finally, the tragedy occurred as the heavy downpour started during the monsoon; the rainwater made the "longkang" spill over and Mo-peng died by drowning.

But this did not deter the narrator who finally braved into the house. Meanwhile, May Ling, the daughter of "That Woman" went missing and the mother suspected it as a case of kidnapping by the loan sharks to whom she stood heavily indebted. As he entered the house he described his feelings in detail. The thought of Mo-peng occurred in his mind. He was a bit undecided whether to go up or walk down the hallway to the backyard of the house. As he moved forward, he heard the sound of sobbing. Initially he thought it to be ghostly but the sound somehow appeared familiar to him. With an indecisive voice he called out the name of May Ling. With the rescue of May Ling from the haunted house the narrator was accorded the status of a hero.

Written against the backdrop of Japanese occupation of Malaya and Singapore during World War II, the novel tells the story of a small group of people in a kampong. History, humour and nostalgia are interspersed as the author goes on narrating his story in a simple, fluid style. The reader never feels ill at ease except when he has to stop and check the meaning of some dialect word or slang. To help the reader the author has provided a glossary in his "Notes" at the end of the book. Another feature of the style is its vividness achieved through his art of detailing.

The author, while trying to capture a faithful picture of life in the kampong, provides a balanced portrayal of the children and the adults. While the novel charts out in some detail the aspirations of the youth of the village community, the idiosyncrasies of the adults are also portrayed in a vivid manner. The apparently simple life of the village is interspersed with complex and problematic relationships among the various characters. The novel ends with a strong sense

of nostalgia as its narrator casts a longing lingering look backwards. The kampong is "Gone, but never lost, permanently preserved in memory" (239).

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