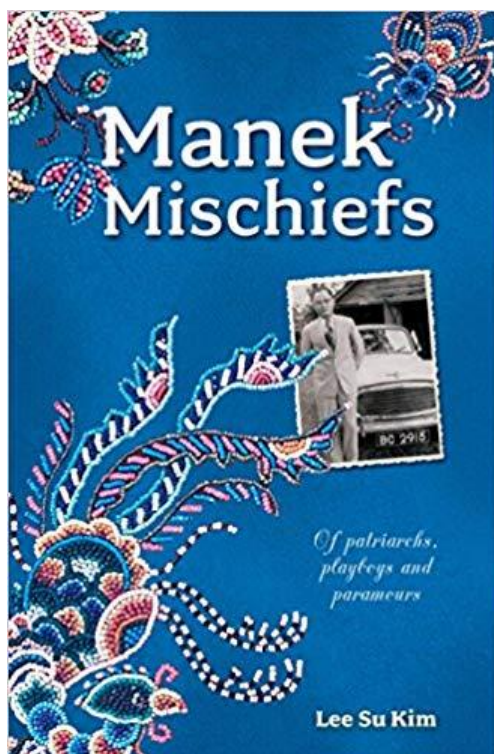


Lee Su Kim, *Manek Mischiefs: Of Patriarchs, Playboys and Paramours*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2017. 188 pp. ISBN 978-981-47-7178-8.



*Manek Mischiefs*, Lee Su Kim's last book in a trilogy of stories on the Peranakan community, is a sumptuous text, replete with photographs of objects significant to that community, personal photographs of the author and her family as well as Peranakan poems or *pantuns*. There are eight stories in this collection and the stories are bookended by photographs of a multitude of items from the Peranakan culture from beaded shoes and bags, silver teapots and *cherrot* cases, to tablecloths, tasselled mosquito net holders and colourful tiffin carriers called *tengkat*. These objects reveal an exquisite eye for detail which showcases the fine craftsmanship which went into their making. The author herself says in the Preface, "I have decided to name this book after the vibrant and brilliantly-coloured manek, the last book in this collection of stories about a beautiful heritage culture and community" (10). Indeed, the text, with its many photographs, enable us to immerse ourselves in what is a unique culture.

Su Kim explains, “The word *manek* (‘beads’ in Malay) is used to describe the minuscule glass beads from Bohemia and Czechoslovakia, brought over to this region by traders” (9). And, indeed, *Manek Mischiefs* is a gleaming collection of stories which shed light on the Babas and Nyonyas, collectively called the Peranakans, a hybrid community. This ethnic group formed about 700 years ago when the “Chinese traders arrived in Malacca, the centre of the Malacca Sultanate” (13). These traders subsequently intermarried with the local women. Su Kim provides a short write-up on the community in the “Preface” and though it is brief, it gives the uninitiated reader a glimpse into the background of this community.

Most of the eight stories in this collection have intriguing titles: “The Stump in the Hole under the Casuarina tree in the Garden of the Mansion by the Sea,” “The Merry Wives and Concubines of Patriarch Baba Gan,” “The Bride Who Refused to Strip” etc. The stories cover a range of contexts and circumstances, most of them delivered with large doses of humour. Even more, these stories reveal different customs and traditions of the Peranakan, their rituals and also unacknowledged, but firmly entrenched, practices. “The Bride Who Refused to Strip” tells the tale of a young bridegroom who marries a woman picked by a matchmaker and his mother. Unfortunately, the woman does not allow her husband to touch her and this puts him in a quandary because the practice is that a newly-wedded couple have twelve days to consummate their union or there will be trouble between the two families. The story gives us many interesting details about a Peranakan wedding: the matchmaking process, the elaborate preparations and the way the bridal boudoir is decorated. The author’s detailed descriptions allow us to feast on the magnificently dressed up bedroom. The story ends with a collection of photographs of items from a Peranakan bridal bedroom. These images enliven and give context to the story which, incidentally, ends with a twist.

Another story, “The Kueh Brothers,” has the Japanese Occupation in Malaya as its backdrop. Due to the dire situation at that time, two brothers go around selling their mother’s cakes. This story captures the youthful camaraderie between the boys and their innocence at a time when there was much anxiety amongst the adults. “Everybody is nervous and jittery nowadays. Pa hides in his room or slips out. To where, he won’t say. Ko thinks Pa is working with something resisting. I don’t know what he’s resisting as the Japs are already here” (85). The story also ends with photographs of the different paraphernalia used in making Peranakan kuih. Accenting the stories with photographs is a nice touch in this collection. The photographs impart a semblance of materiality to the stories enabling the reader to engage more fully in these stories.

In the “Preface,” the author writes that she thought it fitting that the last book in this trilogy should be dedicated to her father: “Just as *Kebaya Tales* was inspired by my mother’s stories, this book is inspired by a Baba I loved very much and still do. He was my father, Mr Lee Koon Liang... a wonderful and loving

father, a man of integrity and courage with a great sense of humour” (11). The blurb at the back of the book asserts that the Babas take centre stage in this collection. In these stories they play variously different roles from a dejected young groom to heartbroken men of varying ages – fathers, grandfathers, young and older brothers. These men cover a range of ages and each carries a distinct voice. However, and, interestingly so, the dominant characters in these tales turn out to be the women and we are introduced to a whole host of them, wilful but loving mothers, domineering mothers-in-law, caring but fiery sisters, beguiling women, young and old, who create chaos in the hearts of the men they encounter. Indeed, I would say that the women characters invariably take centre stage in *Manek Mischiefs*.

Among the stories in the book, one which is particularly moving is the last story, “Through Lara’s Eyes” which is about a young woman who loses her beloved dad, a man who dies trying to save his neighbour. In recounting the past, the bond between father and daughter is seen to be so special and nurturing that one wonders to what extent this story is based on the author’s own father. Lara’s father, Mr. Lee, loved his family very much and his favourite place to take his family for holidays was Port Dickson. Lara’s narration of the past creates a composite picture of her father as a young man, then as a husband and later as a father. In the book, Su Kim includes a few personal photographs of family holidays in Port Dickson. The affection Lara has for her father resonates with the author’s tender tribute to her father in the “Preface.” Towards the end of the story, the narrator reflects: “In my dreams of the future, he would be there, always a beloved and needed presence, laughing, beaming with happiness at all the milestones of our lives” (183).

Yet another story which has a deeper layer of meaning is “The Stump in the Hole under the Casuarina tree in the Garden of the Mansion by the Sea,” which is about a beautiful Peranakan mansion in Penang, once home to a rich family: “Sherwood Villa. My family home and the most precious place in the world to me” (37). When the female narrator visits the family home, she recalls the halcyon days of her grandfather and in doing so captures the early history of the Peranakans as they formed their own niche in Malaya alongside other communities. But with each sporadic visit, the narrator is dismayed to see the gradual ruin of the grand house, the loss of people and a lack of respect for treasured customs. She laments, “There was no sign of any casuarina tree, the garden was razed and flattened in anticipation of a huge construction project. A signboard confirmed it all as I walked out of Sherwood Villa for the last time. It said SOLD” (57).

*Manek Mischiefs* as well as the other two books in the trilogy, namely *Kebaya Tales* and *Sarong Secrets*, could be seen as Lee Su Kim’s attempts to keep the precious Peranakan stories alive. It is indeed a praiseworthy attempt and I do

hope the writer continues to entertain us with more tales about the Babas and the Nyonyas.

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