

Rozlan Mohd Noor, *21 Immortals: Inspector Mislán and the Yee Sang Murders*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2010. 302 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-28-8.

Malaysian writing in English has moved a step further with the publication of Rozlan Mohd Noor's crime novel entitled *21 Immortals: Inspector Mislán and the Yee Sang Murders*, by Silverfishbooks.

I was not quickly attracted to the book (people do judge books by their covers!) simply because the cover design was neither a "sizzle" nor a "steak." Rick Blechta, a graphic designer once wrote about the difficulty of designing covers for crime novels he was working on. He said cover design needed tone and one must know whether to sell sizzle or steak. Sizzle would transmit the feel of the book and would let the readers know the type of plot they would encounter while steak would show something that actually happened in the book, e.g. a body found in a library.

The cover of *21 Immortals* reminds me of promotional images of Malaysian film *The Red Kebaya*. I was looking for something masculine; something more evil. So I continued marking my term papers until the Editor texted to remind me of a review soon overdue.

I read it quickly once. Wrote to the author to raise a few disturbing issues. Questions and explanations went back and forth. I read the book again and I'm sold! I think there are developments in Malaysian writing in English worth examining.

The book is not as bad as its first impression is. I did not like the cover, I did not like how women were represented in the book (except for the marvellous character of Supt Samsiah), and I did not like how the men in the novel looked at women or talked about their former girlfriends or female colleagues. It was just too male a world, I thought. I was set to recommend the book to boys who have no marbles to play with.

But Rozlan Mohd Noor is not a writer who pretends. He is honest about the reality we live in. Malaysia has changed. People are confused or no longer care about their identities. The book is not of a world to be judged based on morality and accepted cultural norms. You would get Johan (a Malay Muslim policeman character) who openly declares of his relationship with a married woman:

*"I once lived with a girl for two years. I knew nothing about her until one day a man showed up with a four-year old child claiming to be her husband and the boy, their son."
Bursting into laughter, Mislán says, "You're joking, right?"
"I'm not shitting you. It's the truth," Johan replies.*

"Then, what happened?"

"I told the guy he has the wrong house. After they left, which took some convincing, I packed her thing, carried it to her car, and told her never to come back."

"You're a class act, Jo. Did you ever see her again?"

"Nope. Guess she must have moved in with another ignorant bastard. A pity, though. She was good under the sheets," Johan says, shaking his head, laughing and swearing. (59)

You will also see Dr. Safia, an intelligent Malay Muslim female forensic pathologist who is not ashamed to offer her apartment key to Inspector Mislan (so that he could come in and go as he likes as they work together on solving the Yee Sang murders). They did finally make love but this love scene was not made central. It was portrayed so casually. Even Jeffrey Archer would not be so casual about his hero's love scene with his lover!

These may all be the book's window dressings to sustain the interest of easily bored readers but the underlying values or debates of such a portrayal cannot be dismissed in a country which takes literary narratives as real (I'm referring to the reactions and responses to Abdullah Hussain's novel *Interlok* in which certain episodes in the narrative caused a political uproar and the Prime Minister as well as the parliament were dragged in, resulting for a call to ban the book!). If there is anything of any intellectual value in the book, it is the space to discuss the changes which have taken place in Malaysia and Malaysians with regard to how prepared they are to look at reality in the eye. Rozlan is brave enough to offer this insight and his representations of changing values in modern Malaysia should not be judged too harshly. He had eavesdropped on conversations in pubs and expensive kopitiams in the city, he wrote in response to my email on his "loose" and foul-mouthed characters. The voices are real. They are ours or fragments of our society. This is not the time to be moral.

Rozlan has many interesting and appealing characters. There is no doubt about it. However, sometimes I feel he gets too carried away by these characters and forgets that a crime novel should make the crime/s central. I think Rozlan has overdone his window-dressings, his Caesar salads. At the end of the novel, the crime is not even solved! (It would be passed on to another team due to internal and external political pressures within the police force itself).

That is another interesting point: Rozlan is set to expose the local politics in his little organisation (it happens elsewhere too but it is very courageous for a former officer of the Royal Malaysian Police to detail what could go wrong in police investigations; that the enemies would not only come from outside but also from within).

The book has given useful insights into a policeman's job. It is not as easy as we think it is and not all policemen or women are corrupt as they are commonly perceived. The book offers a fair portrayal of people who want to do

good and those who are set to do evil and how in the end, the good always prevails.

My final verdict: *Go get the book!* You will be pleasantly informed of the latest in Malaysia and Malaysian writing in English.

Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf
International Islamic University Malaysia

Works Cited

Blechta, Rick, "The Cover Conundrum." 25 Jan. 2011.

<http://typem4murder.blogspot.com/2011/01/cover-conundrum.html>.