

Karina Bahrin et al. *A Subtle Degree of Restraint and Other Stories*. Kuala Lumpur: MPH Publishing Group, 2011. 138 pp. ISBN 978-967-5997-81-5.

In *Becoming a Writer*, Dorothea Brande reminds us that “there is no triteness where there is a good, clear, honest mind at work.” In fact, it is honesty that is the source of originality: “If you can discover what you are like, if you can discover what you truly believe about most of the major matters of life, you will be able to write a story which is honest and original and unique.” This honesty is one of the most appealing qualities in *A Subtle Degree of Restraint*. All the stories in the collection are told in an unpretentious voice that is refreshingly simple and earnest. The simplicity is such that there is a universal appeal because it deals with people and events that we can all associate with and understand to some degree.

One of the first stories, “The Prize” is about a woman who is on a TV quiz show similar to “Who wants to be a millionaire.” The story echoes some of the ideas in Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire* as we follow the protagonists’ quest for fame and fortune only to share in their disappointment when the ultimate reward is denied at the very last moment. “Teatime in Bangsar” is like the TV show *The Real Wives of Orange County*, and even though most of us may only aspire to Paris Hilton’s way of life, we can certainly imagine what it is like being a bored socialite trying to keep up appearances of domestic bliss. Eileen Lian manages to add a twist to this theme by juxtaposing the socialite’s illusory lifestyle with that of a single, down-to-earth working woman’s naïve dreams.

All the stories are easy to relate to because they are very cosmopolitan, but in many ways they are also interesting and different because they contain surprising cultural mixes. One of the characters is a half-Chinese Malaysian woman looking for her Indian roots; another is an Indian man, who speaks a variety of languages including Japanese, but is often mistaken for a Caucasian. Many of the characters have studied in the US or the UK; they eat *mochi*; they buy IKEA furniture; they listen to Kylie Minogue; they live in houses with Roman columns and Tudor beams. They have what seems to be self-explanatory names: Elena, Peter Peters, Kit, Badariah, Manpreet Singh Sidhu, Parvati, Ban Peng, Chee Pei, Khatijah Dzulkifli; some are westernised, others culturally distinctive.

Despite the unique mixes of cultural cocktails that each of the stories offer, the balance of globalisation and cultural distinctiveness is a difficult one to maintain, hence sometimes homogenisation is seen to reduce local cultural elements to simple names. For example, the names of characters or places like Kuala Lumpur, also called KL, remain just words. Kuching, Setapak, the Klang

Valley are all impossible to visualise for someone who has never been to Malaysia. Certainly, it is impossible for a writer to delve into everything with great detail, but when a reader picks up a “Malaysian” short story collection and is faced with simplified cultural signifiers lost amongst globally familiar ideas, there is a strange sense of confusion as well as disappointment.

Although all the stories are well-executed, it can be argued that they conform a little too rigidly to form. Since all of them are very short, it is difficult to ignore the overall cyclical and repetitive pattern of the stories. Indeed, the uniformity of content and writing style sometimes verges on sterility and blandness. While innocent eyes that see simple truths are appealing, and the earnestness in this collection deserves applause, honesty alone can be a setback. Whether it is in the sharing of cultural differences or a gamble on story devices, a little deviance may sometimes be necessary to take a story to another level. In this respect, the collection may be suffering from too much restraint in one instance and no restraint in the other.

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