

Rozlan Mohd Noor, *Inspector Mislán and the UTube Serial Rapist*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2012. 298 pp. ISBN 9789833221417.

I first came across Inspector Mislán when his first book, *21 Immortals*, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize for the Asia-Pacific region in 2010. I approached this Malaysian crime novel with some trepidation, but was pleasantly surprised as soon as I started reading it. The style was simple but not simplistic, the hero was flawed, but someone we as readers could get behind, and the locations and socio-political background were real and recognisable.

Author Rozlan Mohd Noor has since produced two more books – *Inspector Mislán and the DUKE^xpressway Murders*, or *DUKE*, and the latest effort, *Inspector Mislán and the UTube Serial Rapist*. He seems to be creating these novels astonishingly quickly but, I am happy to report, that does not mean that there is any slacking off in terms of quality. *UTube* is pacy, topical and exciting, with the characters growing more complex, and the moral undertone becoming increasingly troubling and murky.

The police world that Rozlan depicts is probably nothing like what most of us would expect, given that if all goes well, our involvement with them does not generally go beyond making the occasional police report about an accident or a break-in. Rozlan, however, writes from his eleven years of experience as an Officer with the Royal Malaysian Police, and this gives his work an edge of reality. He does not depict a glamorous world – rather, his police officers have to work all hours, with inadequate sleep, forced to put aside considerations of family and even personal hygiene. Mislán has an extremely supportive immediate superior, but their mutual boss is a rank poseur, concerned entirely with what the press are going to say, and hilariously convinced that his officers should be able to work the same kind of magic that he sees Abby and McGee work on *NCIS*. The boss does not seem aware of the reality that the police are quite under-equipped in many ways – two police constables, assigned to follow a suspect, lose her because she turns onto an expressway, and they are unable to keep up with her on their little *kapchai* motorcycles; no high-speed car chases here! And apart from this, the investigators are hampered at every turn by the familiar string-pulling culture that bedevils us, as a variety of *Datuks* and officials from this ministry or that try to interfere in the investigation. And in the end, Rozlan leaves us with an ambiguous, morally complex ending, loose ends left trailing; there is no pat ending, and the novel is all the more real for that.

There is also a strong streak of reality in how Rozlan situates his stories within the Kuala Lumpur cityscape. Locations are recognisable, as are the frustrations of working in the city. Desperate to get to Bangsar, where his

quarry has been located, Inspector Mislan gets stuck in a jam on Jalan Loke Yew. Rozlan's characters do not just move through the city, they inhabit it, staking out their suspects at hawker stalls or planning high tea with friends at somewhat ritzier locations in Bangsar.

Rozlan's ability to create sympathetic and believable characters has improved from the first novel to the third. In the first, Inspector Mislan remains a little bit of a cipher; he is a more than competent investigator, with a somewhat maverick, rebellious edge. In the first two novels, he works only with his trusted sidekick Johan. This gives a rather one-sided view of Mislan and his methods, so that he tends to come across as something of a solitary crusader, given to unorthodox (perhaps even questionable) methods, but always working for what is right. In *UTube*, however, Rozlan plays Mislan's character off some new characters, who provide a different, and rather more critical, perspective on Mislan.

Chief among these characters is Inspector Sharifah (or Sherry) from the Sexual and Child Abuse Investigation Division, who is the first character we meet in the book. She, unlike Mislan, is conscientious and by-the-book. Her job dealing primarily with rape victims also means that she has a level of sensitivity that appears to be lacking in Mislan. But this new perspective on Mislan comes through only because she is there as a standard against which he can be compared – because of the contrast Sherry provides, Mislan becomes a much more ambiguous, and occasionally even unlikeable, character.

Rozlan has chosen to centre the investigation around a variety of hot-button topics which will resonate with Malaysians, such as issues of gay identity, and attempts by the authorities to classify homosexuality as a disease which can be cured. Intertwined with this are other issues such as individual vulnerability to violence on the streets or in the home, and the pervasiveness and invasiveness of social media within the private sphere. His approach to these issues is down-to-earth and non-judgmental.

The author has managed to create an exciting, suspenseful atmosphere in this novel, not so much because we want to know whodunnit (we more or less find that out a fair way before the end), but because we don't know how Mislan and his team are going to trap their quarry. Rozlan adds to the suspense by giving the team a very tight deadline by which to finish (i.e., they have to do it before Mislan gets suspended), as well as by detailing the manipulation and power-play that goes on behind the scenes, among Mislan's superiors, to ensure that the whole investigation doesn't get derailed. This is in fact a detail I find sadly believable – that the whole investigation could fail because of the vanity and unreasonableness of one man in a position of power. And in the end does the investigation succeed? Well, not quite. And that too is sadly believable.

I only have one bone to pick with this book – it could have done with more stringent copy-editing. Other than that, it is a good read: a fast-paced

story rooted in contemporary Malaysian reality, and thus creating something of a recognisable Malaysian voice. I look forward to the next instalment in the series.

Susan Philip
University of Malaya