

Robert Yeo, ed. *One: The Anthology*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2012. 232 pp. ISBN 978-981-4346-39-9.

When compiling *One: The Anthology*, Robert Yeo (one of Singapore's leading poets, playwrights, creative writing teachers and literary activists) set himself an enormous challenge: to pick and include the best short story of "Singapore's best authors." In his Introduction, Yeo says that he narrowed down his search by choosing stories from published anthologies and ignoring those that can be found online and/or in journals, but added that his ultimate criteria for selection was highly personal and subjective. Therefore, while it is debatable whether or not Yeo has indeed chosen "the best," he should be lauded for offering a one-stop fair sampling of works from a cross-section of Singaporean writers who have come to prominence since the country's independence in 1965.

The anthology features 21 authors who can be broadly categorised¹ into the following generations:

- Pre-WWII and WWII: Gopal Baratham, Goh Sin Tub, Catherine Lim, Lim Thean Soo, S. Rajaratnam, Arthur Yap, Robert Yeo.
- Immediate post-WWII: Ho Minfong, David Leo, Suchen Christine Lim, Kirpal Singh.
- The 60s: Colin Cheong, Felix Cheong, Philip Jeyaretnam, Claire Tham, Simon Tay.
- Post-60s: Don Bosco, Jeffrey Lim, O Thiam Chin, Alfian Sa'at, Tan Mei Ching.

From the above groupings, it becomes clear how the stories in *One* reflect a range of historical subject-matter that Singaporean writers have covered over time. Writing in his youth, when anti-colonial fervour was building, and before he became a politician and Singapore's first Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam brings to life the tense-filled minutes before, during and after his eponymous Indian terrorist attacks his political target in "The Terrorist." Having personally lived through the Japanese Occupation, in "The Shoes of My Sensei," Goh Sin Tub writes about a young man's ambivalent feelings towards his Japanese teacher at the end of WWII when the victorious British have detained all Japanese military personnel. In "Poisson Ivy," Colin Cheong uses his National Service experience to evoke how some National Servicemen try to inject life

¹ As the birth years of David Leo, Don Bosco, Jeffrey Lim, O Thiam Chin and Tan Mei Ching are not stated in the authors' biography section, I am taking some liberty in placing them within the above classifications from what little I (either in a personal capacity or from what I have been able to research via the Internet) know of them and when they started publishing their work.

and interest in their clerical jobs by raising fighting fish inside their office as they serve out their period of compulsory military conscription.

One is also an excellent showcase of stylistic experimentation that various Singaporean writers have accomplished through the decades. While many of the stories are straightforward narratives written mainly in third or first person point of view, there are fine examples of fable (Ho Minfong's "Birds of Paradise"), satire in the form of a lecture (Jeffrey Lim's "Bard by Numbers: The Fundamentals") and expressionism (Felix Cheong's "It's a Wonderful Lie" – a pastiche on the old movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*; Arthur Yap's "A Beginning and a Middle Without an Ending," and Philip Jeyaretnam's "Painting the Tiger").

Yeo's own work, "Interrogating Photography," provides an interesting contrast to all of the other pieces in the anthology as it is an extract from his memoir, *Routes: A Singaporean Memoir 1940-75*.² Precisely because it is creative non-fiction, "Interrogating Photography" cannot be classified as a fictional short story. Consequently, it sticks out like a sore thumb as the sole piece of non-fiction amidst the various fictional "short stories from Singapore's best authors" (quote from the book's cover). This is in spite of the fact that Yeo is an elder statesman in the Singaporean literary scene as a poet, playwright and arts activist, but who admits he has come "late to the genre of short story writing" (231).

At a macro level, Yeo has sought to recognise Singapore's best prose writers. He mirrors this search at the micro level by selecting stories that are linked thematically, i.e. the search for identity. Sometimes, this quest for a sense of self is literal. Don Bosco's protagonist in "Everyday Will Be Sunday" wishes that everyone would call him by his Christian name, Michael, instead of his formal name, Chew Tai Thong. A fifty-five year old man retires in David Leo's "The First Day" and bounces energetically about trying to fill and mark his first day of retirement with meaningful activity.

Another trend of exploration is that of familial identity. For instance in "Interrogating Photograph," Yeo examines an old family photograph of his mother, aunts, grandmother, uncle and a suitor of his oldest aunt, to better understand familial history. Tan Mei Ching has her Singapore born and bred narrator-protagonist accompany her grandmother on a visit from Singapore back to her roots in rural Fujian province in China; in the process, the narrator-protagonist gains personal insight about her cultural roots ("Crossing Distance").

How religion and ethnic culture affects one's sense of identity is the key motif in Alfian Sa'at's and Claire Tham's stories. When hosting an orphan child for a Hari Raya day celebration, Junaidah, in Alfian's "A Borrowed Boy," is

² Please refer to my review of Robert Yeo's *Routes: A Singaporean Memoir 1940-75* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011) in *Asiatic* 5.2 (December 2011): 158-60.

forced to confront her sense of how Malay families function and her notions of Islamic charity. By comparison, Tham has a more satirical approach in “Hell Hath No Fury.” Grandma’s sudden conversion from Catholicism to Pentecostalism turns the Tan household upside down and comes to a crisis when the Pentecostal pastor refuses Grandma’s donation of an antique table for the church altar because the table legs, carved with Chinese dragons, are symbols of a pagan culture that the new church cannot accept.

Particularly hard-hitting are the stories that experiment with form to deconstruct Singapore’s national identity. In Jeyaratnam’s “Painting the Tiger,” Ah Leong dreams about painting a feral tiger in the jungles of Mandai in order to reclaim the wild soul of Singaporeans, so otherwise tamed by colonisers and nation-builders past and present who have appropriated the symbol of the lion for their own purposes (Singapore being the modern version of “Singapura” or “Lion City”). Lim, in “Bard by Numbers: The Fundamentals,” takes apart the myth of how Singapura received its name by assuming the perspective of the author behind the *Sejarah Melayu* (the historical chronicles that are the main source of the Singapura naming myth), who teaches young bards the need to create positive propaganda for their patrons if they are to live and earn a living. In Ho’s “Birds of Paradise,” chickens are encouraged to live comfortably as chickens and any chicken who dreams of non-chicken behaviour (like the main character Lani who dreams of flying) is considered a hawk and thereby forcibly discouraged by the Chief Rooster and the Island Submarine Division to desist from further acting in a non-chicken manner – a clear allegory for modern-day Singaporean socio-political conditions.

Given all of the above, *One* is a reasonable and quick introduction to the variety of modern and contemporary Singaporean prose writing in English. As a sampler, it succeeds in wetting the appetite of readers to want to discover the works of individual writers that capture their interest and curiosity and to see for themselves whether indeed Yeo has selected the best stories from the best writers for his book.

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