

Iskandar Al-Bakri, *The Beruas Prophecy*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2011. 233 pp. ISBN 13: 9789833221349.

Iskandar Al-Bakri's first novel, *The Beruas Prophecy*, is a fascinating swashbuckling tale of political intrigue, piracy, rival secret societies, greed, a growing British colonialist presence in and around the Malay Peninsula, and the long buried treasure of Malik Al-Mansur, the ruler of Beruas who abandoned Beruas and fled from the Portuguese with his treasures. What makes Al-Mansur's treasure so compelling is that it took forty elephants to carry them. For nearly two hundred years, no one has been able to locate where they are buried. And this drives some people mad. One of those men is Scotsman Robert Fullerton, the newly appointed British Governor of Penang Island. For him, finding the treasure is an obsession. He faces a formidable task – enemies he doesn't understand, a treasure that is guarded by a secret society and magic, and the blindness of his own greed.

The story begins innocuously enough. The year is 1823. In Balik Pulau on a Friday evening just after eight, an elderly man named Yaakob readies himself to teach the Malayan martial art *silat* to his students. One of his best students is Jasin, the eighteen-year-old son of his cousin Yunus. The next morning, Jasin and his friends set out to take an examination to become members of the Sultan's guards. On the way they encounter a badly hung-over young Englishman named James Randwick Lowe and three of his friends. As Jasin's cart passes by, it splashes mud and water on the boots of the Englishmen. When one of Jasin's friends jumps down and offers to clean his boots, Lowe snarls: "You've ruined my trousers, blackie!" and kicks him in the head. Trained in *silat*, Jasin's friend grasps Lowe's leg in a lock and throws him to the ground. Enraged, Lowe pulls a pistol from his coat and fires, hitting Jasin in the stomach. Lowe and his friends then leave; later that day, Lowe catches a ship to Perak and disappears.¹

When Jasin's friends return home with Jasin's body, one of his friends says to Yaakob: "You're probably wondering who shot Jasin." Yaakob replies that "it was a bullet shot from a pistol, probably a revolver. Only white men have pistols." Jasin's friend tells him the killer's friends called him Mr. Lowe. Yaakob sucks on the cigarette he is smoking and throws it away. "Then it's my task to find Mr. Low."²

The scene then shifts to Penang, August 20, 1824. "James Randwick Lowe lights a thin cigar with a match as he leans against a lamppost at the end

¹ First page of Chapter One, Kindle edition.

² The last page of Chapter One, Kindle edition.

of Light Street, while continually tapping his feet on the pavement. A peacock of a man, Lowe wears a dark grey morning coat over a plain white shirt with puffed sleeves, his green high cravat matching his pinstriped trousers. When Lowe lifts his top hat, it reveals lavishly curled red hair.

“No more pesky mosquito infested rivers for me,” Lowe thinks. “I am a district officer, not a bloody surveyor. I deserve a slice of the easy life.” He takes another long drag on his cigar. “No matter. With Uncle Robert’s help, I’ll become the Resident of Perak before I turn forty,” he dreams.³ But “Uncle Robert” has other plans for this dandy, and that is finding the Beruas treasures. Unknown to both Governor Fullerton and James Randwick Lowe, the governor’s elderly servant is a man named Yaakob, who takes special note of the young man. During a meeting, Lowe reveals that his men have located where the treasure is buried. With typical British aplomb, Governor Lowe devises a plan to go and claim it. Then reality intervenes in the persons of a pirate king, a secret society named Indera Sakti that is bent on finding the treasure before the Governor does, and Darul Kubra, a secret society set up to guard the treasure and prevent its theft. The action is violent, bloody and rife with betrayal as the various parties clash.

In the end, as one expects from this kind of story, the bad guys are dead and the treasure is saved, at least for now. Then nearly one hundred years later a down-on-his-luck Scottish rubber planter and his friend find where the Beruas treasure is buried. And there we are left hanging at the end of the novel, longing for yet another adventure, though we know beyond any doubt what the outcome will be. It is not surprising at all that Iskandar Al-Bakri’s first novel has been long-listed for The Commonwealth Book Prize 2012.⁴

Is this a mainstream adult historical adventure novel, or, as the publisher sees it, a “YA, with an adult crossover,”⁵ I don’t see it as a YA novel, as it is too complex, with too many people, and no teenagers in it, other than Jasin and his friends, and he is murdered by James Randwick Lowe early in the first chapter. According to Dwight L. Burton, the first person to write criticism of YA novels, a “good novel for the adolescent reader has attributes no different from any good novel. It must be technically masterful, and it must present a significant synthesis of human experience (and) *a clear vision of the adolescent as a person of complexity, individuality, and dignity* (my emphasis).”⁶ *The Beruas Prophecy* is

³ Beginning of Chapter 2, Kindle edition.

⁴ 15 November 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmCdeSC6NOQ>.

⁵ Personal communication from Raman Krishnan, Silverfish Books, Malaysia.

⁶ 15 November 2012. <http://bookalicious.org/2012/04/ya-101-defining-ya-lit/>.

an adult novel, not a YA novel, though older teenage boys may enjoy it because it is such a swashbuckling adventure.

I look forward to reading more from Iskandar Al-Bakri. A lawyer, he lives and has a law practice in Ipoh.

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