

**Gerald de Cruz, *Colliding Worlds: Memoirs of a Singapore Maverick*. Kuala Lumpur: Marshall Cavendish, 2009. 240 pp. ISBN 978-981-261-870-2.**

Gerald de Cruz's life, encapsulated within the pages of his memoirs entitled *Colliding Worlds: Memoirs of a Singapore Maverick*, was peppered with adventures, exploits and heart-rending experiences of a non-conformist. As De Cruz himself rightly says, "his life was punctuated by one explosion after another" (14). One cannot but admire his gallantry or nerve in many of his feats. In his lifetime, he rubbed shoulders with the likes of Tan Cheng Lock, David Marshall, Lee Kuan Yew, as well as idiosyncratic people such as Auntie Stella, Alias, Agnes de Souza and many others who had made an impact on his life. Whether they were political heavy weights or common people contented with the simplicities of life, De Cruz has a place for them in his memoirs. They touched him, or rather, he was touched by them, and they had a hand in shaping his life and personality.

De Cruz lived during a tumultuous period in Singaporean history – the economic crash of 1930s, British colonialism, Japanese Occupation, Communism and, finally, the independence of Singapore. Each of these times provided much fodder for his memoirs. In the context of the economic crash, for example, he speaks of his father's loss of job and his mother's sacrifice which finally led to her death. He did not share his father's colonial mentality – his political consciousness was displayed early as a child when he disobeyed his father and continued making overtures to his amahs from China. He was well aware of the bleakness of their lives and appreciated their "steadfastness and stoicism" (24). Perhaps he learnt these attributes from them; De Cruz was equally steadfast and stoic in all his undertakings as shown by his mission to Moscow, his work with the intellectually-challenged children and his desire to help drug addicts. All these stories add up to show a man larger than life, passionate about his beliefs and willing to take risks.

De Cruz's story of travelling to Moscow is the most compelling in his memoirs. He had been attracted to Communism and its ideals; his allegiance to it was the "solution to all the psychological problems arising from my rebellion against my father" (75). But De Cruz soon became disillusioned; the man Lai Teck who was the founding member of the Malayan Communist Party absconded to Hong Kong with more than \$1 million. He also began to realise that an armed revolt in Malaya and Singapore was not the right strategy. Since he could not persuade the local Communist leaders to disband arms, he planned to head straight to Russia and convince the leaders that "time was not ripe for armed revolt" (81). Without any cash but having enough conviction, De Cruz took along Coral Phipps, his future wife, whom he married in Karachi.

Together, they traversed half the globe – from Melaka to Madras, Karachi (from where they were deported), Baghdad, Istanbul, Athens, Rome, Prague (from where again they were deported) and finally landing in England where they stayed for six years before returning to Singapore for more excitement. Each of the cities they stopped revealed more of De Cruz’s tenacity or knack for adventure. It also exposes Coral’s love and support for her husband’s conviction. In one instance, after being told of their expulsion from Prague, De Cruz “apologized to her for having led her from Singapore to Prague on a wild-goose chase.” But Coral, as De Cruz puts it, “was strong and wise” (131). As much as the memoirs shows the quest of a maverick, it also reveals much about his significant other, Coral, who displayed love and much fortitude during their hard times.

Despite his strong political convictions, De Cruz also had his gentler side. As a teacher at Osborne House in England, a school for children with special needs, he showed the children how they could go beyond people’s expectations despite the physical and mental challenges they faced. He saw the potential in each child. He nurtured them with love and encouragement. Soccer was a game that De Cruz chose for these special children. While they never won any game, he helped to develop camaraderie amongst the special children and normal children, and took the pain to form a “formidable” team with their own jerseys and boots. As De Cruz himself says, “Doesn’t education, in its true sense, ‘liberate’ all of us? And shouldn’t intellectually disabled children be part of that liberation?” (154). It is his belief in the potential of all human beings, whether they are intellectually challenged or not, that provides us with another facet of De Cruz and his capacity to make a difference.

While the earlier part of the memoirs gives us a chronology of De Cruz’s life, the later part of the book is less coherent about his life. Snippets of his views on gun violence, the drug menace, the fasting month and articles which had previously appeared in *The Nation*, in some ways, impair an otherwise excellent flow of narrative about an extraordinary man. While these nuggets of narrative reveal different aspects of De Cruz’s life, they are certainly wanting in the unity that characterises the earlier part of his memoirs.

Despite the shortcoming, *Colliding Worlds: Memoirs of a Singapore Maverick*, is definitely a good read. De Cruz’s narrative captures the historical moments of Malaya and Singapore; some of the stories he discloses demonstrate the challenges of building a new nation. This is the significance of the memoirs – as much as it tells us about the man and the people around him, it also reveals the nation grappling with turbulence and turmoil. It is not only the history of the man that we learn; it also provides a record of Singapore’s birth and struggle.

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