

**Rozlan Mohd Noor, *Bayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2013. 250 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-45-5.**

Rozlan Mohd Noor seems to be on quite a roll, producing four novels in as many years. He is steadily adding to a growing body of crime fiction based in Southeast Asia, alongside works by Shamini Flint and Barbara Ismail, as well as Colin Cotteril. Rozlan is perhaps unique in being a complete insider in the world he writes about: a Malaysian settled in and writing from Malaysia, he is also an insider in the sense that he was once a policeman, a member of the professional world about which he writes. Rozlan is no stylist – his prose is generally bare and straightforward. But he is a storyteller, and his novels have so far been quite gripping and engrossing – a basic requirement, really, for thrillers and crime fiction.

His first three novels were told from the point of view with which Rozlan himself is most familiar – that of the police. In his latest novel, *Bayu* (Wind), he takes a different approach, focusing instead on the criminal and his gang. In this novel, we encounter Bayu, an elusive criminal who engineers the kidnapping of a young American boy in Kuala Lumpur, as a kind of last hurrah before he retires from the world of criminal activity.

Like Macavity the Mystery Cat, Bayu is more of a rumour than a real person to the police. Like the wind from which he takes his nickname, he passes through, sensed but unseen, and apparently impossible to capture. Interestingly for a former Special Branch officer who has so far written from the police point of view, Rozlan creates an almost charismatic protagonist out of this kidnapper. This charisma is central to Bayu's career; he seems able to get people inside in his scheme purely through his force of personality. Of his gang in this caper, only one is an actual criminal associate. The others are people he seems to have picked up (randomly, in one case) and convinced to join him in his criminal enterprise. Two, at least, are attracted by the possibility of making a lot of money. One appears to do it purely for the excitement, and because of an irresistible attraction to Bayu.

In this novel, Rozlan's law officials come across a little less human and sympathetic than they do in his first three novels. Characterisation is rather flat. Police personnel are portrayed only in their roles as police, and we get no glimpse of other aspects of their personalities. This is perhaps not surprising given that the focus is more on Bayu and how he tricks the police. Unfortunately, Rozlan's portrayal of Bayu is not quite well-rounded or compelling enough to make up for that lack. I said earlier that Bayu is "almost" charismatic. The trouble is that this charisma is not something that emerges naturally from Rozlan's portrayal of Bayu. Rather, it is presented to us without much evidence to back it up. Sandra, the female protagonist, seems to fall for

him and fall in with his plans simply because she's a little bored with her life. We have no idea why she even starts talking to him when she first sees him. Despite the fact that half the novel is told from Bayu's point of view, which means that we readers are in his headspace, he remains pretty much a cipher.

While Rozlan's portrayal of the Malaysian police is somewhat two-dimensional, they do not come across as unlikeable, which is not the case with some of the American characters (the kidnapped child's parents, the Embassy personnel, CIA agents, etc.). Some of these portrayals are stereotypical, playing up the image of Americans as arrogant, blustering blowhards. One of the characters is even called Bubba. Perhaps most surprisingly, the mother of the victim is shrill, hysterical and scornful of the Malaysian police, making her a thoroughly unsympathetic character. This is, however, countered by some fair and more balanced portrayals of other characters, with some of the Malaysian and US law enforcers learning to respect each other's views and experience.

This is not to say that Rozlan's portrayal of the Malaysian police is all rosy and upbeat. He is obviously all too familiar with those who are unable to think beyond their rather narrow boxes. In one scene with which I am sure many Malaysians will be able to relate, Bayu walks into a police station and leaves an envelope for ASP Ong; Bayu's name is clearly written on the envelope, but the two constables do not notice. When Ong asks why he was not alerted immediately, one constable foolishly says that they were instructed to alert Ong only if Bayu were to *call*. Ong is left screaming "Bodoh, bodoh, bodooooh!" in helpless frustration.

If I have a complaint about this book, it is that Bayu's plans never seem to get derailed. He is always a few steps ahead, with all his targets responding exactly as he anticipates. Rozlan calls Bayu the master planner, but the fact that everything is so slick and apparently easy takes away somewhat from the tension. Perhaps this book has something in common with television shows such as *Hustle* or *Leverage*, where even when it looks like the gang's plans are falling apart, we later find that this was actually part of the plan. The difference is that with *Leverage* and *Hustle* we know, as part of the premise of these shows, that the gang of good-guy con men will be victorious, and the interest lies in seeing how they pull off their capers, as well as in seeing the bad guys come face to face with poetic justice. In the case of this novel, however, we do not know from the start who will win, and a little more uncertainty about the success or failure of Bayu's plans would have added to the suspense and excitement. As it stand, the gritty tension which characterises his first three books is sadly lacking.

However, the book is still an enjoyable read on the whole, largely because Rozlan is good at creating tight, well-paced plots which succeed in "hooking" the reader.

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