

## Remembering Syd Harrex



Syd Harrex will be remembered by many for many accomplishments. I will remember him for three reasons.

First, his love for Indian writing in English, which resulted in many articles, books he edited or co-edited and those he wrote. Of the last category, there is his essential guide to the modern fiction of English writing in India titled *The Fire and the Offering: The English-Language Novel in India 1935-70*, in 2 volumes, handsomely-bound in a Writers Workshop Greyboard publication, 1978. I am a proud owner of these tomes because I bought them after first meeting Syd at Flinders University when I went to a conference in Adelaide in the 80s, organised by CRNLE, the Centre he founded. Syd spoke enthusiastically of the works of the pioneers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, and as a result I became a keen reader in this area.

Second, I remember him as a great advocate for New Literatures in English, a term he preferred over the old Commonwealth Literature because it was a more inclusive terminology, embracing writers in English like those from the Philippines who were not part of the British empire. It was more than an academic alignment because the activist in Syd led him not only to found the Centre but also to start the *CRNLE Reviews journal* to publicise the new literatures. Again, I found his example infectious, subscribed to the journal and wrote a few reviews in it. Also, I thought the idea of focusing on reviews was brilliant.

Third, my delighted discovery that he was not only an academic/critic/activist but also a fine poet. We last met in Adelaide in early 2001 when I informed him I would be in Adelaide and he asked me to read. I did, to a good audience of Syd, Jane his wife, staff members of the Centre and students. We later adjourned for lunch and talked, and he told me about his second book of poems and we exchanged books. I left a copy of my selected poems called *Leaving Home, Mother*, published in 1999. He later reviewed it in the CRNLE journal entitled "Home and Away Singapore Style," in 2001. It remains one of the most perceptive reviews of my poems ever written. I sometimes find reviews of my writings disappointing because the reviewers often describe the works under review without evaluation. It was not Syd's way, and he began in the opening paragraph with, "The significance of the publication of Robert Yeo's *Selected Poems* is twofold: it marks the personal achievement of an on-

going career that spans poetry, fiction, drama and editing, while it further confirms the creative strength and cultural versatility of contemporary Singaporean writing in English. Yeo's creative talent, indeed, is conspicuously versatile and, accordingly it is relevant to access, in relation to its poetry, the spread of his multi-genre output."

This sort of endorsement, coming from a writer of Syd Harrex's stature was very empowering. I am blessed with a longish writing career which has its ups and downs, and statements like these helped me to ride the down up. Syd Harrex, on further reflection, was one of a few Australian activist-critics, and among them I must mention Michael Wilding, Anne Brewster, Paul Sharrad and Dennis Haskell, who thought Singaporean /Malaysian writings in English were worthy of international attention.

I regret very much that I did not see enough of him. He always mentioned that I should go to the frequent conferences he organised in Kangaroo Island. I wished I had taken up the invitation. I reviewed a book of his poems which I cannot find now but will find it as soon as possible and will find the time to read the poems in it and the rest of his other poems.

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