

**Russ Soh, *Not the Same Family*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2013. 188 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-7696-1.**

*Not the Same Family* by Russ Soh is a collection of ten short stories. They are simple stories told in a simple way. In this collection there is none of the epiphanic moments one normally expects from this genre. Despite its limited word length, short stories, such as those by James Joyce and Katherine Mansfield, have the capacity to yield moments of deep insight and startling realisations. The stories in *Not the Same Family* are actually rather “long” and instead of snippets of human nature and life we are given relatively lengthy excursions into the labyrinths of family relations. And perhaps this is what is interesting about Soh’s stories. They keep trying to uncover the layer upon layer of complexity which constitute family life. I do believe that Soh is trying to show that family relations, seemingly mundane, are extraordinary in this very mundanity.

The families which people the stories in this collection come from diverse backgrounds and situations. There is the son who witnesses the utter sadness of his mother who, because of financial problems, is forced to give up her youngest son for adoption (“Visiting Brother”), the anxious daughter who is compelled to look for her father who deserted the family many years ago (“My Late Father”), the brother who is troubled by the deviant behaviour of his sibling (“Burying Brother”) and the son who has to care for a father who has tried to commit suicide (“Make Sure He Doesn’t Try Again”). Because Soh allows his stories to meander, we are given ample opportunity to appreciate, understand and even feel sympathy for some of these characters. Though the epiphanic moments may be missing here, the stories however do dwell upon the vagaries of human nature specifically in relation to the family.

An air of familiarity envelops these stories for the Malaysian and Singaporean readers particularly. What endears these stories to us are the voices Soh adopts in these tales: they are easily recognisable to readers in Malaysia and Singapore. Soh does not use Singlish (or Manglish for that matter) extensively but manages to capture the nuances and particular patterns of thought of people from this region. Their voices draw us into the situations they find themselves in and it is this identification which also peaks our interest in these characters. The stories are also peppered with familiar Singaporean locations: Geylang, Balmoral Road, Bukit Timah, Kolam Ayer, etc. And of course there is frequent mention of the HDB flats, a ubiquitous feature in Singapore. But some of the stories are located in distant lands, the Greek islands, Australia and America.

Soh uses different familial permutations here: relations between wife-husband, daughter-father, son-father, daughter-parents, siblings and more. The

families here are caught in ordinary contexts. They are on holiday, planning a wedding, preparing to study abroad, facing illness, aging, etc. What the writer tries to evoke is the varied, confused feelings that arise out of these situations when family members interact. In “Her Wedding Dinner Gown,” it is interesting (but also perhaps typical) the way a simple comment by the father provokes such a response in the daughter, but as the mother surmises at the end: “The day they decide to stop fighting like this would be the day that something has died inside either one or both of them.... The love for each other will always be there. But the mutual admiration would have ebbed, or disappeared. And neither one really wanted just the one without the other” (90). Most readers could empathise with the feelings of the narrator who is trying to help his father in “Make Sure He Doesn’t Try Again.” The father is old, ill and feels a failure and yet cannot communicate his sense of helplessness to his family except in a most extreme way. “In the tradition of Chinese father-son relationships, we never did talk much. Through bits and pieces snatched from rare conversations we had had and the overheard exchanges between him and Mum and the occasional relatives who came to visit, I managed to stitch together a pastiche of his life” (38). In “This Little Piggy,” the father of the family is trying to advise his son about man-woman relationships and as he does do, evaluates his own relationship with his wife. Sometimes friends become like family members, when they allow the person to be his truest self, as in “Stick More Close Than.”

The author tries different techniques in some stories. “It Takes Two” is wholly structured as a dialogue and “My Big Fat Greek Epiphany” loosely takes on the form of a Greek drama, complete with a chorus. But on the whole, the stories are straightforward, set in ordinary, everyday contexts and what underlies these stories is the lure and pull of the ties that connect and bind the unit, the community, the phenomenon we call family.

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