

Jason Lundberg, ed. *The Epigram Books Collection of Best New Singaporean Short Stories, Volume 1*. Singapore: Epigram, 2013. 288 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-6234-6.

In his short introduction to this intriguing collection, Jason Lundberg claims that during the last 10-15 years a renaissance, a rebirth of the Singapore short story has occurred. The emergence of numerous new local presses, notably Math Paper Press and Epigram Books as well as numerous small literary magazines, including *Ceriph*, now provide an unprecedented number of avenues for local short stories to be published and disseminated. While at times reading this collection I doubted whether there really is evidence, based on quality as opposed to quantity, to suggest that there really has been a short story renaissance in Singapore, Lundberg's collection throws a renewed spotlight on a handful of very important new voices that truly deserve exposure.

Since arriving in Singapore a decade or so ago, US writer and editor Jason Lundberg has made a substantial contribution to Singapore's literary scene. One wonders what state Singapore literature, often beleaguered by institutional censorship, prejudice and neglect would be in without the energy and vision of figures such as Lundberg, his boss at Epigram, Edmund Wee, Fong Hoe Fang at Ethos, Kenny Leck at Books Actually/Maths Paper Press, or numerous other more recent, younger writer-editor-promoters/movers and shakers such as Joshua Ip, Jennifer Champion, Pooja Nansi and Tse Hao Guang. Singapore literature seems to be experiencing a quantum leap in richness and diversity due to such figures. I think it not an exaggeration to suggest that more local literary publications have emerged in Singapore in the last decade than in the previous 40 years since 1965. Certainly the fate of the local short story at least is looking far healthier than when Lundberg first encountered it about 2003: little more than a few desultory old copies of Catherine Lim collections in the old Select Books.

In compiling this collection Lundberg has clearly done the donkey work. He has carefully read hundreds of new local stories and culled from that reading the "Top twenty" represented in this anthology. As Lundberg suggests, this collection is not, as appeared to have been the case with earlier local short story anthologies, about enshrining and contributing to a canon of local literature. Rather Lundberg's collection is more about "curat[ing] the best new fiction [c. 2011-12]" (viii), a snapshot of what is currently happening. Indeed this, volume 1, is the first of what is hoped will be a series of biennial anthologies. Lundberg claims he chose the twenty stories on the strength of "exceptional writing, strong narrative voice, compelling plot, memorable characters, and the overall effect of moving me in some way as a reader" (x). These seem sensible and fair enough criteria, but whether every reader will find substantial evidence of them

in each of these stories, I don't know. Lundberg identifies in the stories general themes of "loss," "domestic realism" and, a theme seemingly close to the editor's heart, judging from his brief nostalgic introduction, as well as his own writing, "fantastic fabulation" (xii). Indeed, Lundberg seems to have based his idea for this digest of recent local fiction on similar, annual science fiction anthologies he encountered growing up in North Carolina, via which readers can sample the happening best, and writers old and new can feel pleased to be included or at least noted in the back pages' seventy-three "Honourable Mentions." Perhaps, as Lundberg suggests, the stories included here could provide some much needed insights into the Singaporean psyche c. 2011-12, albeit through a pronouncedly Chinese Singaporean lens.

Much as I liked aspects of this volume I did have some problems with Lundberg's collection. I appreciate that good writing deserves some effort and attention from the reader, but often in this collection I had a hard time enjoying, or indeed deriving any satisfaction from a number of these stories. The quality of the prose was often characterised either by an over-plainness, or an overstraining in purplish prose, including the regular introduction of "literary," as opposed to naturally used, words that often jarred and not in a good way. I also questioned the originality of many of the stories. Several stories seemed to have confused good writing with the plain dull. I kept wondering whether this could be the fault of the writers, their local upbringing, or the limitations of the "Singaporeanness" most writers may have felt obliged to engage with or in? In some stories there was almost an Enid Blytonesque, or even Edwardian quality – with little sense of irony, or more importantly playfulness, to compensate. This seemed a strange experience to be having when reading stories written a decade or two into the twenty-first century, by writers who for the most part have experienced a fairly cosmopolitan, global nurturing as writers. Or was that the problem: the insidious influence of fifty years of a fetishisation of "good English" over more naturally used locally lexis? Other writers like their constant government seemed to have shifted from aping British to attempting to emulate US literary forms and authors. While too consciously literary, some stories often seemed to exhibit a simple inability to capture life, people, the place clearly, vividly, movingly or memorably. And where are anything approaching haunting, quotable lines and passages? Inauthentic dialogue, and a lack of nuance were also disappointingly in evidence. Short stories traditionally often appear in magazines, or collections – suggestive of them being the most accessible and possibly most immediately entertaining of literary genres. Rarely did I find myself laughing, even smiling, when reading this collection. Perhaps this is reflective of me as the wrong, poor reader of this recent collection of this form of local literature (or expecting too much, setting my standards too high after reading Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Ali Smith, Gregory Nalpon?). I must also confess here to trying to

be a little more robustly critical after years of trying perforce to be nice and positive in reviews about anything local. Alternatively, can Lundberg's choices be questioned? As he observes in his introduction:

Deciding on the 'best' of anything is always an exercise in subjective opinion, and one could be driven crazy by questioning why one mediocre story was picked.... (xi)

The hard truth may be that the Singapore short story writing 40 years on from Robert Yeo's seminal *Singapore Short Stories*, for all its development, competence and clear potential, still has some way to go. And how helpful have creative writing workshops here and abroad really been to the twenty-first century Singapore writer? Again I seem to be too dense a reader of Singapore literature to catch the appeal of stories that while competent, even professional, doing all the things technically a short story should – seem to this reader pedestrian, slightly interesting, slightly humdrum, derivative. What is essentially Singaporean about them is often hard to imagine beyond the status of the author, the setting. Singapore writers and readers shaped by an educational system unparalleled in privileging language over literature in its English lessons may be the better judges, appreciators of these stories. As for me, I don't recall previously almost dropping off while reading the narrative of a jealous killer. Halfway through the collection I was craving the distinctive, idiosyncratic, odd – which while not always present here – I know is present in Singapore, in other Singapore writing. A phrase like “the dark region of her crotch” (85) seems sadly symptomatic. Other awkward, jarring phrases included “quizzical indifference” (50), “robust, blithe muscle” (70), “I clench my wife's hand” (81). But overall I felt I was encountering a deadeningly chaste, antiseptic prose – devoid of genuine stylistic experimentation, or serious engagement with genuine local issues, if at the same time seemingly widely welcomed by the established literati, reminiscent of much of the kind of local writing pushed so earnestly onto the local O level literature syllabus recently.

And yet, perhaps a quarter of Lundberg's collection comprises of marvellous discoveries or recoveries. While a perhaps too Singaporean Chinese dominated volume, there are a handful of references and engagements with the enduring, distinctive, potentially energising Malay presence in Singapore. Indeed, the volume finishes strongly with Alfian Sa'at's extended “Malay Sketch,” “The Borrowed Boy” – set in a Singapore in which we only happen to encounter Malays inhabiting the invasive, alien HDB heartlands landscape. Dave Chua and Alvin Pang's stories feature intriguing visions of “after Singapore,” worthy in places of Richard Jefferies. An otherwise predictable HDB landscape, challenging for any writer in its bland sameness, at least from a distance, is defamiliarised by lions and tigers distributing justice on home-grown

kiddy fanciers and loan sharks. In Chua's story, as in Cyril Wong's admirable effort, we also encounter the first of several instances gesturing to the possibilities of a local desire for escape from developed Singapore – even if that means death. And the mob, the majority of Singaporeans – who don't listen to Beethoven or Chopin, who don't even read literature are also present. I identify with the neighbours' frustration at being a captive audience to the protagonist's piano playing. So much the developers seem to have expediently not thought through in gifting Singapore's non-elite citizenry a highrise cheek by jowl tenement future. The refreshing idea of the jungle reclaiming the island, even after the trauma of half a century of aggressive development – again set me in mind of Richard Jefferies' *After London*. I like the telling details, such as the young having no space on this small island, having to make love in cars. But when Chua's character says, "I couldn't take her sincerely," is the author as savvy and playful as Arthur Yap or merely sloppy? And whether all of Chua's fertile ideas coalesce illuminatingly in this one short story I don't know. Alvin Pang's factional future myth (also *After Singapore* in its theme), "The Illoi of Kantimeral," while not wholly satisfactory, was the first story I encountered in the collection I felt like going back to and carefully rereading.

Felix Cheong and Karen Kwek's wonderful stories derive their power in part from their skill in evoking authentic democratised local voices, but also in authentically, critically getting to grips with this rich, troubled island. Cheong's "Because I Tell" is narrated by a 16 year old mentally handicapped boy. The story is convincingly told, telling, revealing, deftly patterned. Cheong's careful, detailed but sparing use of topography and speech make things so much more vivid. The same can be said of Kwek's "The Dispossessed," and to some extent of Yu-Mei Balasingamchow's "Lighthouse." Kwek's story is a true work of imagination and literary skill, engaging full on with ordinary, real Singapore, with female desire raising its thorny-rosy head on the final page. With Kwek, interest levels perceptibly rise – as we encounter skilful engagement with local place and local issues – including "the trauma of eviction," as Alfian Sa'at once called it in *Malay Sketches*. Through the domestic Kwek gestures tellingly to the bigger picture: the Singaporean poor losing out in the process of interminable development, dispossessed, while the savvy few politically or business placed rise speedily on the backs of the shift from kampong to heartlands, that capitalist sleight of hand the masses were not cunning or strong enough to parry or avoid. Kwek's use of telling, local transient, authentic details also raise the game,

The bamboo-framed settee and a coffee table now stood on the ceramic-tiled floor of the square-shaped living room. The windows, shuttered and fastened with grilles, gazed blindly out onto the corridor. Ah Kong, shrunken and bewildered, peered into his bedroom and asked for his old wooden bed and his chickens. (116)

Kwek is a good storyteller. To make the location of Leith Road operate as a memory portal back to kampong days is surely not as easy as Kwek makes it look. Lastly, there is a satisfying unique oddness about the story. What will scholars of Singapore literature, should they ever emerge beyond the handful we have now, immune to the dictates of promotion and tenure, make of that?

Jeremy Tiang's "Harmonious Residences" is another story related in the first person, and another story featuring the imagined mutilated bodies of Singaporeans. As with kwek's story, the ever widening gulf between HDB pasture fodder and the high rising shepherds is played with, critiqued with a straight face,

... the Party always make you spend a bit of time getting to know people on the ground before you leave them behind, so if you do well enough to stand for election you can claim to have grassroots support. (121)

Tiang also nimbly teases the ties between politics and business in making the magic of development happen, as well as the seeming deemed cheapness of life in Singapore, especially the lives of foreign workers: "Foreign workers don't count. Who are they going to complain to?" (125). Reviewing the story belatedly in 2016 following the recent Pasir Ris MRT tragedy, "Harmonious Residences" seems ever more pertinent: Singapore's blame culture, where instead of sympathising, saying sorry, the powers that be must blame others, even the deceased, to deflect scrutiny nearer home. The Kafkaesque possibilities seem endless here. It's a shame so few local writers harp on this theme successfully. These aspects help make Tiang's story seem, to me at least, arresting, original in the telling, resonant. "Once the conversation moved onto ascribing blame, it was relatively simple for me to deflect it in other directions. The lift manufacturers, the various ministries with a hand in this" (124). As if this was not enough, Tiang's introduction of a vengeful PRC widow of the worker into the mix satisfyingly problematises this story and the system portrayed.

Telling details are also adroitly deployed in Yu Mei Balasingamchow's otherwise slightly bland story, "Lighthouse." Her gradually revealed juxtaposition of dangerous alive Malaysia with safely crippled no entry Singapore is nicely done, playing on the uneasy psychological and perhaps unfounded relationship with a geographically close, formerly closer neighbour. At times the story almost seems a reworking of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, supplemented with a Blyton mystery. Ng Yi-Sheng's "Agnes Joaquim, Bioterrorist" seems the most audaciously energetic story in the collection. An eighty-year-old Queen Victoria arrives at the Raffles Hotel via airship. This piece of Singaporean steampunk is imaginative, raw, fresh and camps up local history recklessly, cheerily, refreshingly. Ng's enormous potential as a writer –

his fascination with language and all aspects of life – is in evidence here in abundance. I would love to read a whole book of similar playfully audacious stories of faction and fabulation. I just felt this one could have been further developed, polished. His deployment of “English” is fun, but did Ng mean to come across quite so Dick van Dyke British (“They’re words in the Fukinese dialect, missus. The meanin’ ain’t fit for a lady’s ears” (99)). Or perhaps this Zadie Smith, sub Firbankian, cartoony quality is part of Ng’s strategy. Verena Tay’s story “Walls” is similarly ambitious, as well as being heartfelt, socially conscious and often memorable. But Wei Fen Lee seems the most successful at such flights of fancy in her memorable “Welcome to the Pond.” Ann Ang’s “Scared for What” is the most funny, while also in many ways being a pretty serious story. Justin Ker’s “Joo Chiat and Other Lost Things” is certainly the most moving, and clearly one of the most original. Alfian Sa’at’s story may not have such immediate impact, but one gets the sense that he is the writer who perhaps has most painstakingly cared and agonised in the crafting of his story. In forging his selection, Lundberg was clearly aware that he was saving some of the strongest stories till last.

In conclusion, Lundberg has initiated a wonderful idea. Now everyone has access to twenty representative stories of the period (93 if you include the recommended titles listed in the back). The collection should prove very helpful to any contemporary (or hopefully future) reader or student of the Singapore short story. I also feel pleased that I come away from this volume with a sense that women comprise the strongest most memorable characters in contemporary Singapore short fiction. Lastly Epigram is to be congratulated on the overall presentation of this collection. The paper seems of unusually good quality. Hopefully this book won’t suffer foxing as so many new Singapore books do. Also the book is of a nice, generous size and print, helping to make reading these stories an even more pleasant experience. I very much look forward to reading succeeding volumes.

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