

Russ Soh, *Tales From The ECP*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2014. 124 pp. ISBN 978-981-09-2270-2.

Russ Soh was a corporate executive who enjoyed writing so much he took early retirement to focus on it. He has since published two collections of short stories about Singapore – *Not The Same Family* (2013) and *Tales From The ECP* (2014). He also has a blog that contains entertaining articles about his musings and experiences.

Tales From The ECP is based on a very specific location and community. For those of us who do not know much about Singapore, ECP stands for East Coast Parkway, an iconic sprawling estate connected to parks and beaches, food courts and harbours. There are ten stories in this collection. Each of the tales begins with a description or a reference to some part of the ECP before introducing us to the characters and their stories.

The first story is about a couple who live on the eleventh floor of a building called Laguna Park. Their next door neighbour locks himself in the bathroom by mistake and consequently the inhabitants of the complex, who know virtually nothing about each other, are forced to interact. The story concludes with an insight on the differences between “condo living” and “landed property living” in Singapore.

The second story is about a mysterious man who goes to the beach by the ECP. He does a strange, almost ritualistic, parade down to the beach with two female companions. The narrator stalks him for weeks, albeit from a “discreet” distance as he believes every person’s privacy should be respected, only to be left with a burning question when the man vanishes for good.

I enjoyed the next two stories the most. “On a Moonless Night” is about a boy who has to attend national military training and is very resentful about it. His father manages to convince him while gazing out of their apartment window why their country needs him. “Love Fishing, Hate Fish” is about a little boy who spends his free Sunday mornings trying to make a difference to the world, especially for the fishes. Both stories are simple but poignant and struck a chord with me.

The fifth story is about a Brazilian student studying in London who travels to Singapore and camps under a tree to ponder the next step in her life. The following story is about an “autumnal” meeting between a student and his teacher. Then, there’s a story about a lady who believes she can fix broken park lights by some telepathic ability. There’s a story about competitive parents debating the merits and elitism of the Singaporean school system and its effects on their children’s education.

The interestingly titled “United Nations Park” focuses on the multicultural undercurrents present in most of the other stories. Like any nation in the world,

Singapore is made up of “locals” who have been residents for a longer time and “foreigners” who are new arrivals. However, with names like Mrs Thirupati, Choo Peng, Tony Fernandes, Jimmy Fung and Govindasamy, the difficulty and even irony of trying to define an “us” and “them” offers a whole new level of interpretation.

“Dead End” is the final story and it presents an over-arching theme. An un-named “local” is exploring a deserted park in the ECP and thoroughly enjoying the unusual solitude when a construction sign warns him not to trespass. As he is standing there wondering what to do next, a foreign-looking person appears from nowhere and disappears down the path that he has been blocked from. This is “the story of my life” he laments. We realise that the narrator has been slowly losing his mind after getting fired three years ago. He lives with his mother, relies on handouts and has no incentive to find another job; yet, the fact that a *foreigner* has a job that provides access to what the *local* regards as his “home” is a very bitter pill to swallow.

I thought Soh’s use of the ECP as a quadrat to frame an area of study and help us examine more closely the population within it was an excellent idea. It gave the book structure and a very interesting perspective. Unfortunately, it also brought a certain rigidity and blandness to the telling of the stories. For example, small variations in the description of similar buildings and parks in every story becomes unexciting after a while; the nature of repetitive walks in unremarkable parks lead to observational accounts which often end abruptly or even a little pointlessly. I suppose, if, as Soh professes, his stories are “targeted at readers in Singapore and Singaporean expatriates in other parts of the world,” then it is my own failing for not seeing the nuances of a place and a people I am unfamiliar with; however, he also states that “[t]he way I had written them made them also very accessible to anyone anywhere else reading them in English” (“Literary Pandering”). Indeed, Soh’s clear and faultless English is easy on the eyes, but again it fell short of speaking to me as a non-Singaporean. Despite his many mentions of Singlish, an attempt at broken English and the use of Hokkien terms like “*ang mob*” and “*sioh ab*,” I was not taken in by the possible richness of the Singaporean voice and its multi-faceted identity.

Soh is undoubtedly very observant and skilled at building up atmosphere. He takes mundane occurrences and successfully injects a sense of excitement and significance into them. As a reader, I really appreciate this effort, but disappointment inevitably creeps in when the excitement leads to nothing or something seemingly significant lacks conviction. In the first story, we are told twice that Choo is so excited and amused she can barely contain her mirth, but when she recounts the situations they are really not all that funny; it is like a comedian laughing at his own jokes, which has the unfortunate effect of ruining the jokes. In “A Dip In The Sea,” Soh tries to build up suspense by saying things to this effect: “she was holding a box of something” from which “he

pulled off a strip of something” and “dabbed at something” on his forehead; it turns out he was pulling tissue paper from a box of tissues simply to dry his forehead (33). This is followed by: he was “appearing to be pulling at something” and “appeared to pull one corner of it up over one hip,” then “seemingly gazing out to sea” had his hair combed with a “little black object” (34-35). Is there any real need to accord this much mystery to a man getting dressed and combing his hair by the seaside? Yes, the man was a bit of a mystery – but possibly because the narrator was too cowardly to approach him? Yes, he also disappeared mysteriously – but can cheap speculation serve as an epiphany? “Another thought struck me,” says the narrator, “*Nah*, I dismissed the notion. *It cannot be! – he looked much too healthy*” (40). This conclusion to a tale of mystery was disappointing to say the least.

It is clear that Soh has very meaningful things to say about Singapore. His stories revolve around the environment, the multi-ethnic community, people’s respect for privacy and immigration problems, just to name a few. There is an annoying gravitas to his narrator but generally the stories are easily relatable and can be humorous in their own way. However, if I were to take issue with some aspects of the book, the first would be that many of the characters fail to convey any real depth of opinion or conviction; the second would be the unsatisfactory ending to some of the stories; and, finally, the author’s rather arbitrary treatment of Singapore’s complex and tantalisingly porous boundaries. If a topic has been brought up, time and again, it would’ve been useful to see the author channel it instead of using a bunch of characters to voice their wish-washy opinions. The book is enjoyable as a light read, but I think a reader with more expectations might feel a little let down.

Works Cited

Soh, Russ. “Literary Pandering.” *Living the Writing*. <https://russsoh.com>. 16 January 2016.

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