

Philip Holden, *Heaven Has Eyes: Stories*. Singapore: Epigram Books, 2016. 254 pp. ISBN 9789814757713.

Reading a story in *Heaven Has Eyes: Stories* by Philip J. Holden is like opening the pages to a diary found in an estate sale – one hears about people with whom one isn't acquainted, and one tries to immerse oneself in this new world. By the time immersion becomes plausible, by the time the reader begins to pull together the threads that weave that character's life together, the story ends. Imagine that the pages have been ripped out of the diary, and one will never know the outcome.

Heaven Has Eyes: Stories is Holden's first foray into fiction beyond the publication of individual short stories, although Holden has published a number of nonfiction works, including *Autobiography and Decolonization: Modernity, Masculinity, and the Nation-State* ("Philip Holden"). *Heaven Has Eyes: Stories* consists of three sections: "Here," "In Transit" and "There." Each of these sections transports the reader to diverse regions in the world. As Holden notes, "The story behind this book begins in Changsha, Hunan Province, China, in September 1986" (*Heaven Has Eyes* 1). His own travel path patterns that of characters in the book. Holden currently lives in Singapore, but he has also spent time in China, the United States, England and Canada. Holden's stories transport the reader to Vancouver, London and Singapore, among other places.

Heaven Has Eyes: Stories includes fictionalised tales of chance meetings with Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore. Lee passed away in March 2015, and stories such as "Gan Rou, Kong Bak" mention "the lying-in-state," which had such "a long line," a likely reference to Lee's death (87; 105). In "When Pierre Met Harry," a meeting between Harry – likely Lee Kuan Yew¹ – and Pierre Trudeau, the former Canadian Prime Minister, occurs. In his "Acknowledgments," Holden explains that "When Pierre Met Harry" "makes use of Lee's 1950 London speech, "The Returned Student" (257).²

Lee delivered this speech when Malaysia was Malaya, before Singapore had emerged as an independent nation-state. In his speech, Lee states, "Colonial imperialism in South East Asia is dead except in Malaya, and our generation will see it out" ("The Returned Student" 8). Lee, also discusses the role of "the rich man's son" and the "impecunious government scholar" (5). In Holden's piece, Laski, the Jewish professor, about whom Pierre and Harry talk, discusses the "end of colonialism" and the role of the government scholar and rich men's sons (195; 197). Perhaps Holden suggests that Lee parrots ideals once delivered by a professor in London? Lee's shadow surely reaches across the pages of Holden's

¹ Lee's English name is Harry. See Seth Mydans.

² In his "Acknowledgments," Holden notes, "A number of the stories also adapt archival or published material" (257).

book. If Lee isn't a character in a story, then his influence on the opposition party, or even the viewing of his body, impacts the characters.

Other stories in Holden's work address the search for love, meaning or closure and the inevitable sigh one gives with regard to the aging process. Holden offers some beautiful prose in his "Preface" and elsewhere: "This story should have an easy ending. It should be about arrival, about finding home" (4). The reader remains uncertain, however, as to which story Holden is referencing in this section. His own or one of the tales in this book?

Holden does concede that "All but one of the stories in this collection are fictions in a very real sense. None of the characters, unless they are actual historical figures, have any intended resemblance to people who are part of my life in Singapore, although they at times pick up small details or phrases from my life" (4). The reader then wonders which as-yet-unfinished story "holds hands more closely than the others with truth..." (4).

Holden also draws the reader into loving moments between couples: Holden himself, as described in his "Preface," watches "tiny globes of light shattering and falling" in someone's hair. Another story, "September Ghosts," glances backwards in time, again offering a snippet into someone's intimate thoughts about a dying old love. One half expects to feel fingers lovingly curling inside one's elbow after reading this tale (191).

In "Penguins on the Perimeter," the narrator reflects on the aging process: "As a young man, he never realised how middle age would ambush him. Not so much physically, but emotionally. Here you are at the prime of your life, a career of solid achievement behind you, loving and loved. And yet you feel fears that you never felt before" (85). Several passages and stories loop back to the realisation that the tide of one's life is ever receding, and some characters accept this with more reluctance than others.

These beautifully written passages, along with brief moments with Mother Nature, balance the more politically focused sections, but others almost venture into the sci fi category – specifically, "The First Star from the Moon." In this story, Holden's narrator describes a mysterious ailment and an Islamic-like star close to the moon underneath the skin of characters, almost like a hologram. One half expects an abduction, but then the curtain falls on the story, in *medias res*.

These private glimpses into personal lives allow the reader to walk in the shoes of the narrator and his/her friends; in other tales, the reader is transported to a mysterious riverbed littered with books and to a kitchen with tea kettles filled with water and crockpots bubbling with pork. Again, the reader pauses at the end of a tale, as if he/she is wondering where the lost pages might be.

If Holden's stories indeed are mostly "fictions in a very real sense," then let the reader scour the pages in this book, descending upon private chapters in people's lives (4). The reader, too, then becomes trapped in this Foucauldian panopticon. Readers and characters become ensconced, in Michel Foucault's

words, in an “enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in [which] individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead....”

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