

Lloyd Fernando, ed. *Malaysian Short Stories*. (Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1982) xvii, 302 pp., \$8.00.

K.S. Maniam. *The Return*. (Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1981) 185 pp., \$7.00.

Wong Meng Voon. *Glimpses of the Past*. (Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1981) vii, 156 pp., \$5.00.

These three books of fiction are set in the multilingual and multiracial context of Singapore and Malaysia, two Southeast Asian nations once part of the British Empire and now a region peopled by a volatile mix of indigenous Malays (roughly 45%) and immigrant Chinese (43%), Indians (10%), and Europeans (0.4%). Reflecting the diversity of this region, one book is a short story anthology by a Chinese (Wong), another a novel by an Indian (Maniam), and the third a collection of stories edited by an Eurasian (Fernando). All three books have some astonishing strengths and some unfortunate lapses, with Maniam's being the most sustained effort and Fernando's the most generous sampling from these societies.

Wong's *Glimpses of the Past* collects ten stories of the 1950s and 1960s by one of Singapore's best known writers in Chinese. Wong (a Ph.D. from the University of Washington) has himself rendered these stories into English, for the most part without mishap. There are, however, momentary infelicities. For instance, "revise" is used (p. 84) when *review* is obviously meant, and *mung bean* must be intended where Wong says a facial mole is the size of a "green bean" (p. 4). Nevertheless, his stories are excellent examples of a social realism tinged with pathos, and the best of them are rendered poignant by a gentle irony pointed at societal and human foibles. They present us with a generous panorama of Malaysian and Singaporean life: the addicting effects of gambling ("The Mahjong Prodigy"), the idealized friendship between Malay and Chinese workers which transcends race and religion ("Eight Hours in a Sewer"), the waste and exploitation of women ("When I see Hui Lan Again," "Elder Sister Kuei-Ying"), the callousness of the moneyed class ("By the Traffic Light").

Lloyd Fernando's edition of *Malaysian Short Stories* (including several Singaporean ones) is of even wider scope and variety, for they comprise twenty tales by eight writers of diverse ethnic origins. Shirley Lim, a Singapore Chinese (who is also an accomplished poet now teaching at Valhalla, N.Y.), is represented by two touching and sensitive stories about children discovering ethnic and generational difference; indeed, Lim's "On Christmas Day in the Morning" and "The Touring Company" have the psychological deftness and stylistic delicacy of a Katherine Mansfield tale. Another Singaporean, Stella

Kon, acutely probes the political conformism of the present generation of her country's children ("The Scholarship"), while the Malaysian Pretam Kaur tells a forthright tale of boyish disappointment in "Pasang" (the Malay equivalent of being "it" in games). K.S. Maniam attempts to capture (somewhat inconsistently) the speech rhythms of the Indian immigrant in "Ratnamuni," a gripping account of the psychology and dignity of a laborer who is also a spiritual medium. John Machado, an Eurasian, brings off a brilliant piece of narration in "No Visitors Allowed," where his sullen narrator seems to have materialized from a Philip Larkin poem. Machado's "Rain, Rain," set during the anti-White riots in India, is also stylistically accomplished, leaving us uneasy about the domineering attitude of the Eurasian protagonist towards his Indian servant-friend.

Indeed, as a whole, Fernando has brought together an excellent sampling of stories from his region. I am, however, taken aback by a lack of editorial vigilance, for I know Fernando to be a meticulous scholar. There are misspellings like "occasion" (p. 31) and "kerosine" (p. 34), solecisms like "she *laid* down on the ... floor" (p. 201), and far too many typographical errors. These stories deserved better.

It is difficult to overstate the good qualities of Maniam's novel *The Return*. Its subject is an immigrant family taking root in the alien soil of its adopted country. Specifically, this theme is woven through three generations of an Indian family transplanted to a Malaysian village. The point of view is located in the protagonist-narrator, a boy growing to manhood during the 1950s and 1960s, the years when Malaysia itself was growing into nationhood after a century of the British Raj. The grandmother represents the first generation, and her attachment to the native past acting against her attraction to the new country is sketched in poetically rhythmic prose, intensely felt images, and controlled nostalgia. The next generation, the boy's eccentric, brutal, and stubborn father, is a pathetic mix of success and defeat in his efforts to assimilate. The third generation is the boy himself, a thoroughly engaging character who rises from menial poverty to genteel prosperity by a combination of hard work and natural ability. There are several outstanding episodes as Maniam maps the boy's progress, in particular, the symbolic and impressionistic chapters depicting the boy's relationship with the English woman who was his teacher. The psychological and material struggle between the increasingly better educated boy and his unlettered father vitalizes the latter portions of the novel which, as a piece of writing, is well wrought. Only one factor prevents unqualified praise. This is the lack of irony with which Maniam portrays the new Malaysian values of his protagonist, values too much nourished by Western materialism and too little cognizant of Asian spirituality.

In sum, all three books are well worth the while of Americans interested in a region known as the melting pot of Asia. Perhaps K.S. Maniam's *The Return* will prove most rewarding for readers interested in immigrant and ethnic literature, but the other two anthologies, especially Professor Fernando's, should by no means be overlooked.

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Jimmie Lewis Franklin. *Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982) 256 pp., \$14.95.

*Journey Toward Hope* is a welcome volume on blacks west of the Mississippi. The author has effectively demonstrated how Oklahoma's geography, between the West and the South, was responsible for its segregated development; white Oklahomans chose the racial customs, policies, and institutions of the Deep South to "keep Blacks in their place."

While the book is not the final word on black Oklahomans, Franklin's presentation provides a portrait of Oklahoma which few people beyond its boundaries understand. The author notes that he had planned to synthesize existing scholarly works about the black experience in Oklahoma from statehood to the present but he found that there were few existing works and what should have been a short project became a long-term undertaking with many special problems. Franklin is to be congratulated for taking the time to construct this history. It is the hope of this reviewer that ethnic scholars of all ilks will read the book for its spirit as well as the content.

"Blacks in Prestatehood Oklahoma" (pp. 3-33) is the weakest chapter of *Journey Toward Hope*. The author argues the positions of various historians concerning the issue of slavery in Indian Territory rather than showing that slavery means "not free." In addition, Franklin's discussions do not make clear the nature of the relationship between Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory and how they were consolidated to form a single state of the Union. This is no minor criticism, because many blacks had migrated to Oklahoma and Indian territories to fulfill their dream-quests. In one sense, the chronology outweighs the message.