

**Anitha Devi Pillai (Ed), *A Tapestry of Colours – Stories from Asia*. Vols. 1 & 2. Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2021. 182 pp. ISBN: 9789814928724.**

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*As for me, I've always liked stories that strain my credulity, rather than ones that affirm what I know, and in payment for that strain make me aware of something I didn't know – the otherwise inaccessible. These are stories that prove, for example, the connection between bliss and bale, or the discrepancy between conventional wisdom and the truth, or that reveal affection residing where before it had seemed absent. Such stories concede what I believe – that literature is a privileged speaking which readers come to hungry for what life cannot usually provide.*

– Richard Ford, from the introduction to *The Granta Book of the American Short Story*, 1992

**T**hese two slim volumes of Asian short stories (twelve in each) succeed admirably in what Isaac Bashevis Singer said was literature's purpose: to entertain, instruct, and inform – in no particular order. The anthology, skillfully edited by Anitha Devi Pillai, goes beyond such requirements because it helpfully caters to readers aged thirteen to seventeen approximately and allows them (including much older readers) bounteous opportunities to be instructed and informed, while being delighted, intrigued, and even mesmerized.

The level of care given to the arrangement of the stories, their brief contextual introductions by the authors before each story, the biographical, inspirational origins and craft comments by the authors following their stories, including an extremely effective and thoughtfully placed glossary offer the fictions accessibility and riches that encourage discussion, further reading and, quite likely, writing by students themselves. An additional plus is that no list of questions follows the stories, permitting the readers to go directly into the authors' commentaries and lessen the chance of dry academic distractions. Far better to let the readers respond directly and personally to the imaginations, places, and lives in these stories. And on occasion translators stand in for absent authors, giving insight into the stories and the process of translation.

The writers are from Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Thailand, South Korea, Japan, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore – and in several instances, outside the region and from other times. For history and myth – recent, ancient, and in between – often help situate the

stories, essential in an anthology like this in our time because the age group aimed at needs to step out of the Internet World, which many of these stories do, taking the readers into flesh and blood reality and powerful myths and imaginations with much allure.

In the foreword, Professor Sheridan Blau writes: “We must remember that short stories are not specialized technical kinds of discourse (though they can take on new and unfamiliar forms and include entirely original features), but they represent the literary genre that is most natural to all human beings in every human society. They have their anthropological origins in dreams and gossip and myths and family adventures and personal experiences that are told in everyday life and are frequently worth re-telling” (6).

This is certainly true and raises questions about other literary genres and what might be the best way to introduce students to literature, which in her brief preface Pillai addresses:

[S]hort story readers were found to be more thoughtful, creative and willing to consider competing viewpoints than nonfictional essay readers by Maja Djikic, Keith Oatley, and Mihnea Moldoveanu from the University of Toronto. Short story readers were also found to be open to exploring unfamiliar territories which helped to broaden their minds and engage them in honest conversations about the lives and actions of others [...] Short stories have been found to be effective in nurturing empathetic readers who are respectful of other cultures. (7)

The stories in both volumes make this clear. Their diversity – points of view, settings, styles, subjects, and forms – can intensify, quirk, and weird human experience in a way that other genres do not, cannot: the reading of narrative in the short story form is a unique literary/life adventure due to its brevity, edginess, dreaminess, mysticism, pessimism, cutting angularity, fantasy, hardcore realism, breath of life, poetry, and the ever-warm-ever-cold presence of death.

The didactic modes (informing and instructing) Singer lists for fiction are not meant to any emphatic degree, but in a few of the stories here the sense of a lesson seems paramount; and while that’s in keeping with the overall objective of the first volume where the younger readers are the main audience, the instruction on occasion is felt abruptly. And mostly that’s as it should be, for fairy tales, fables, and parables, now long tailored for gentler readers, are often harsh versions of the instructive mode involving child labour, cannibalism, violent death, incest, and other disturbing (adult) activities.

“The Young Fan” by Reymund P. Reyes is a good example of the instructive mode, yet it undermines it in this case, and wisely so. Eleven-year old Ginny’s tough realization that her mother means business, and very much on her own terms, is wrenching. The reasons she gives to the shopkeeper when she returns her daughter’s purchase are quite selfish and off mark, but it’s a fine move on the writer’s part as he shows us that adults are only too human and prone to error just like children simply because they are far more busy and constantly under the pressures of responsibility.

Another story, “Voices” by Anitha Devi Pillai, also shows the vulnerability of adults, in this case a teacher. Unlike Ginny in Reyes’ story, young Sudiksha has her priorities in order, but not so her teacher. The lesson learned here is quietly harsh and shows instruction askew. This story has a bold, imaginative time-play and structure.

“The Last Bullock Cart in Town” by Babitha Marina Justin is endearing, and its sweet nostalgia is tempered by Rati’s inevitable confrontation with a changing landscape, a changing life, old comfortable ways of ease and toil being ruined forever. But the story is more than that, especially when Kesavan, the bullock driver, tells Rati his story. Here Justin lifts the story out of bucolic pleasantries, and the brutality of adults, once again, is brought into focus. The story says a lot about having a connection to the land, to nature. And in Rati’s character there is the sense of a young artist forming. She is curious, alert to difference, and is really learning to see, in every sense.

‘You have the best vehicle in the entire world, and you are the best storyteller. Your stories are just like mine.’ Her lips trembled, and her eyes filled with large drops of tears.

Don’t cry, dear child. My father used to say that pain is the greatest messenger. Whenever you cry, an angel will bring you a handful of cheer. (42, Vol. 1)

The ending of this story stumbles, somewhat, with the narrating voice intruding unnecessarily. I got the feeling the writer didn’t want to leave Rati and Kesavan, and that’s quite understandable: these characters, and the bucolic landscape’s beauty, remain with me.

“La Rangu – The Kite Prince” by Niduparas Erlang from Indonesia, is a strange and beautiful story. Kaghati is a kite made of yam leaves and pineapple fibre thread, probably the first of its kind ever made in the world, according to recent research mentioned in the brief

introduction. The leaves of the yam were picked from the grave of La Rangku, the Kite Prince whose father, La Pasindaedaeno, the king of Southeast Sulawesi, sacrificed him. The story opens with young Wadi flying a kite very high, wondering if a kite strong enough and with string long enough could reach heaven where his mother lives. He asks his father about this and is told the story of La Rangku. Then Erlang's story soon, quite remarkably, breaks into a love song of sorts, with an older Wadi, all in fine prose, as is the entire story. The translation by Anne Tucker is excellent:

Tonight, I have found a quiet that seems to cling wistfully to your back. Maybe the cold, the kind of cold that only comes on rain-drenched nights like tonight, brings that quiet with it. A heavy rain has made all the stones slippery, the earth muddy, left the tent [...] leaking, and has swiftly extinguished the flames of our bonfire and the flames in my worried heart. (58)

Other standouts in Vol. 1 are "The Shadow of her Smile" by Tripat Narayanan, "Children's Day" by Charlotte Hammond, and "Swimming" by Muthusamy Pon Ramiah, which poignantly shows the yearning for freedom and life, the pursuit of adventure, that so many boys follow, no matter what. "Itterasshai – Go Well and Come Back" by Maureen SY Tai is another story of note.

The twelve stories in Vol. 1 of the anthology are all accomplished and special in their own way; and they will affect different readers at different times in their lives. The variety and range are also impressive, as is the quality, and carries over into the stories in Vol. 2, with "Newspaper Phantom" by Clara Wok, "Of Cendol and Truths" (about the Sarawak insurgency) by Carol Pang, and "Mrs Yip" by Karen Kao (which is truly memorable) being some of those that stayed with me in the first half of this volume. Karen Kao's style is bracing throughout:

Mrs Yip trawls the streets of Shanghai in search of work. On the Bund, she studies the banners that hang from the stone balconies. One banner promises victory over Chiang Kai-shek. Another offers a cosmetic, guaranteed to whiten her skin. She reads every single one in the hope that someone will notice that she can. But no one bothers with Mrs Yip. Look at her slumped by the foot of a bronze lion. Passers-by lean over her to rub the lion's nose. They say the gesture brings good luck but Mrs Yip is too tired to try. She rubs the paw instead. (40, Vol. 2)

“Si Larut”, set in Malaysia, by Ismin Putera is a wonderful surprise. The story is about elephants and those who can talk to them, among other things. The writer uses brief excerpts from former colonial administrators’ memoirs and studies, in the story, including those by locals who wrote their own history of mining and the elephants’ assistance in this venture. The exposure to this world is strong due to Putera’s skill in arranging his story. He took me back to my early youth, when I was convinced the only worthwhile career ahead of me was zoology. But history is here, too, and power, and communication between men and animals. It would be fascinating if Putera could do for tigers what he does for elephants in this story.

Another story reminiscent of my childhood was the beautifully written and moving “Lotus Flower” by Alice Bianchi-Clark. I grew up in a house of books and a bedroom much like Ubon’s, where books towered over all, and “Those kind, promising words filled Ubon’s soul like warm air fills the silk canopy of a hot-air balloon” (103). Life is given through books of stories, this writer shows us. They can save you. The power and beauty of language is everything, and it’s most worthwhile when used in fiction.

As a reader, I generally avoid fantasy fiction; such things like talking brooms, mathematical geniuses that are lemurs, flying pigs, and worlds where you can drink endless amounts of gorgeous hot chocolate without getting sick have never really appealed to me, which brings me to “The Scarlet Kanjivaram” by Sumitra Selvaraj. The brief introduction to the story intrigued me – I’d had no idea sarees have been in use for over six thousand years. And I grew up in an island where they were plentiful and worn not just by Indian women, but by my mother. What could this story possibly be about? The first paragraph showed me immediately, and immediately I was caught:

Scarlet Kanjivaram came to life as her final threads were woven into place. She stretched her six-yard long form, straining ever so slightly as she was still attached to the loom. As the weaver snipped the bindings tethering her to the wooden frame which had birthed her, the saree felt for the first time the lush weight of her own being. (139)

The sarees talk and chatter, ponder, feel slighted, try to get along with one another and do and don’t but behave well pretty much; they are like proper Convent school girls, stepping enthusiastically out into life, assured of success, their beauty, and happiness in one way or another. And the story amuses, entertains, intrigues, delights; it drew me along with its fine prose and

assertive voices, its multicoloured fabrics and scented, shapely dreams. Then, masterfully, brilliantly, the reader is presented with something that will never be forgotten. Selvaraj could easily be compared to Chekov.

*A Tapestry of Colours – Stories from Asia* (Volumes 1 & 2) deserves wide recognition and reading. The editor, writers, and translators have accomplished not only an exquisite introduction to Asia that embraces its cultures, histories, languages, and people, they have produced a collection of stories that can stand alongside any anthology of its kind. If this anthology doesn't win a literary prize, I will drink huge amounts of hot chocolate and take extended public transport throughout Malaysia, all the while inquiring about lemurs that are mathematical geniuses, flying pigs, and chatty brooms.