

Book Review

The Garden of Evening Mists. Tan Twan Eng. New York, NY: Weinstein Books, 2012. 352pp. \$15.99 paperback. ISBN: 978-1-60286-180-0.

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In 2000, historian Milton Osbourne concluded regretfully that “the number of readable novels by Southeast Asians that are available in English is sadly limited.” The bulk of his overview on Southeast Asian literature then went on to reference novels written by Western writers who had set novels in Southeast Asia, with the exception of Jose Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*.

In 2012, *The Garden of Evening Mists* by Malaysian writer Tan Twan Eng became the first Southeast Asian novel to reach the Man Booker Prize shortlist. His first novel, *The Gift of Rain*, had been long-listed by the Booker Prize, as had his contemporary compatriot Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* and *The Invisible Map of the World*. *The Garden of Evening Mists* won the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2013.

The cultural capital of book prizes is a debate that is worth having, and the recent skepticism over the Man Booker Prize (and its subsequent launching of the Man Booker International Prize) makes the inclusion of two Asian novels in the 2012 shortlist particularly open to skepticism. That the prize eventually went to Hilary Mantel’s *Bringing Up the Bodies*, a novel about the perennial English Tudors, seems to suggest to the most sensitive and skeptical readership, a kind of cultural gate-keeping that is worth scrutinizing.

The Garden of Evening Mists is an excellent and profoundly readable novel. As with Eng’s first work, it explores a period of Malaysian history which is still recent enough to hurt: the Japanese occupation of Malaysia during the Second World War and its after-effects. In *The Garden of Evening Mists*, Judge Yun Ling returns to the Cameron Highlands after retirement, to live out the rest of her days in Yugiri, the garden idyll she built with Japanese lover Aritomo after her time as a Japanese prisoner-of-war. At first an embittered and reluctant apprentice, Yun Ling finds healing in the manual labour and the unapologetic, stoic companionship of Aritomo, who turns out to have his own secrets.

It would be easy for Eng to fall into the trap of exoticising the East, and at times there is a vaguely uneasy sense that this is where the novel is heading. The Japanese garden which Yun Ling builds with Aritomo is imbued with existential significance, with phrases like “the Fragrance of Mists and Tea” skating precariously on the edge of over-translated cheesiness. Aritomo himself is too close to the trope of the silent, mysterious Oriental for comfort, especially in his role as Yun Ling’s *sensei* in martial arts, a role too-often romanticized and exoticized by Hollywood tropes like *The Karate Kid*. And the tattoo Aritomo inks on Yun Ling’s back over a period of weeks, in passages which mingle sex, ownership and blood, is profoundly troubling in its echoes of blue tattoos inked on forearms in the Nazi death camps. Thus does Eng re-weave the texture of Asia into the tapestry of World War II literature.

What Eng is good at doing is revealing the specific and culturally complex Malaysian context without translating it for non-Malaysian readership. Descriptions are lyrically matter-of-fact without being explanations, bringing the Malaysian landscape to fresh and vivid life without making a concerted attempt to decipher it for the outsider. Prominent

Malaysian literary scholar Andrew Hock Soon Ng notes grimly that the “endeavor to make English bear the burden of local experiences is certainly not an easy task.” Eng is, for the most part, able to write the Malaysian experience in an English that is unmistakably the English of an insider, although on occasion the prose slips undeniably into purple.

In response to accusations that too much use of Spanish in his novel is alienating, recent Pulitzer Prize winner Junot Diaz tweeted bluntly and unapologetically, “[X#@\$*!] will read a book that’s 1/3 Elvish, but put two sentences in Spanish and white people think we’re taking over.” You get a slight sense in Eng’s novel of this same unyielding refusal to translate, although this is undermined a bit by the deliberate imagery of exoticism evoked.

It is worth wondering if this quality of Eng’s, of hovering just in sight of the stock Orientalist tropes of the lush and inscrutable East Asian (and Chinese diaspora, in particular) landscape is the reason why he has become the first Southeast Asian writer to achieve such international acclaim. There is some truth too to Hock Soon Ng’s assertion that only face value is paid to the multiracial, multicultural narrative of Malaysia. Eng is a writer to watch – but the challenge for Anglophone Malaysian fiction now will be to produce an international writer of Malayness, a culture and ethnicity which is truly alien to the mainstream international literary imagination.