

Robert Raymer edited Silverfish New Writing 4, a collection of short stories published by Silverfishbooks. In his foreword below, he shares insights on being an editor, describing the process as well as the criteria he used to pick 26 out of 133 stories for this international collection.

Foreword: Silverfish New Writing 4 By Robert Raymer

Silverfish New Writing 4 has a distinct international look, with writers hailing from or are living in – Australia, Bosnia, Fiji, Hong Kong, India, Korea, Malaysia, Nigeria, Philippines, Singapore, UK, and USA – and with stories also set in Canada, China, France, Japan, and Wales. Most of the foreign writers, I hasten to add, do have a Malaysia/Singapore connection, having either lived here, or visited here, or have friends here, while the Malaysian and Singaporean writers – still in the majority – have either studied abroad (or are about to) or are currently living overseas, thus putting Silverfish right smack on a multi-cultural, international crossroads, where I believe it deserves to be.

I first heard about Silverfish from an ex-student of mine who asked me to edit two of her stories, one of which was chosen for Silverfish New Writing 1. For my efforts, she sent me an autographed copy. Later, during a reading for Silverfish's *Collateral Damage*, I was asked to be the editor for this latest edition.

As editor it was my job to choose or more aptly to 'catch' the best stories from the 133 that were submitted to me regardless of where the story was set or the nationality of the writer. The task was a lot harder than I had hoped. The standard of writing was that good. First off, before I even looked at the stories, I established 16 criteria for selection (please go to www.borneoexpatwriter.com to download these 16 criteria), such as character development, character motivation, effective dialogue, description of settings, conflicts on more than one level, tension that pulls you through the story, mood and ambiance, story logic, use of symbols, irony, and writing style. Most of all, was the story interesting and unusual? Did I learn anything from it (and will others)? Was I able to continue to learn from it after several readings?

I did not know the names of the writers until after four rounds of judging, after I made my decision – though I did recognize three stories from my creative writing students (only one was accepted). By judging blind, I was not hindered by the reputation of the writer or whether they were friends of mine. The merit, as it should be, rested solely on the story. Thus I gave new writers an even playing field with those who have been publishing their work for decades. Besides, talented writers don't always write excellent stories; the story they submitted could just be an early draft of a work in progress. Several stories were, in fact, chapters from novels-in-progress. Some stated this on the story; others I found out later. Also I found out, coincidentally, that I did choose a story from an American friend who used to live in Malaysia eleven years ago,

and another from a Malaysian living in London, who I met 17 years ago at a writing workshop in Kuala Lumpur when she was 17.

While narrowing those stories down to 25 (26, actually, but I'll get to that later), I had to pass over many stories that deserved publication; others, despite the quality of the writing, failed to go far enough with the story – lacking in depth, insight, or resonance. Some were mere monologues or what I call thinking-out-loud-about-their-lives-but-doing-very-little-about-it stories, or anecdotes or incidents that should have been part of a bigger story. But either the writer lacked the vision or gave up too soon. Perhaps later, for future editions, the writers will roll up their sleeves and keep in mind that they are competing with a lot of talented writers, those within Malaysia/ Singapore, within Asia, and around the world, and through that healthy competition, if they choose to meet it, their own writing can only get better, and that bodes well for Malaysia.

Even the stories I did choose, those that clearly stood out above the rest and had met nearly every criteria that I was looking for, required some editing: changing words, cutting or rearranging phrases and sentences and paragraphs, and even pages (from one excellent story, I lopped three pages that digressed). Or they needed to expand a scene to capture a bigger moment. Some of the editing, thankfully, was minor, limited to correcting typos and punctuations; others required some serious thinking on my part and several rewrites for the writer. Our goal (mine and the writer) was to bring the best possible version of the story to the reader, though as most writers and editors know, we are rarely satisfied. Years from now, we may look back and wish we had pushed each other a lot harder.

For most of the stories in Silverfish New Writing 4, there is a distinct multi-cultural aspect to the story, and some of these stories confront this cultural change in their lives head on, as in Nana Tokeh Ishiaku's *Changing Ways*, when the return of Woru's daughter from studying overseas upsets the entire village when she leads a protest against the lack of electricity. Or Kim Yooree's *Looking East and Stepping West*, about a Korean father and daughter trying to adjust to a new life in France, or Sherwin Ng's *Drinking Rice Wine*, about a 17-year-old boy who only learns he has an older half brother living in Japan after the death of his parents, then finally realizes: *Sometimes it is the familiar that frightens most.*

In Ivy Ngeow's *Friday Night at the Pheasant*, a mother slaps her son after learning he's leaving her and their business for Australia to marry his pregnant girlfriend, and Lawrence Chin's *Fading Stars*, an excellent character sketch about how Ruel sees himself and how others see him since his return to the Philippines from working in Dubai. Satendra Nandan's *Antyesti Samskara*, is about the author, who lives in Australia, returning to Fiji after the ugliness of the coup, for a funeral, where Hindi funeral rites go back thousands of years. Or Megan Jennaway's *Turf*, whose lively and colorful use of language thrusts you full force in the world of surfing Down Under, *pitching themselves into the belly of God*, after an American TV crew moves in and threatens the use of their beach.

Then there are stories about failed relationships and subtle betrayals as in Woo Ming Jin's *Watch Your Steps*, when Kinohi's girlfriend Minako snaps back at him, *You don't rape me while I'm sleeping.* Note Doreen M Nor vivid use of imagery as she

captures the infectious enthusiasm of four sisters preparing one of them for her first date and who later ends up with something less than pleasant on her hands yet it empowers her in *Butterfly*. Then there's the palpable love-hate tension in Tan Wenxian's *Clay Masks*, the surprise consequences for a boy who witnesses a horrible crime in Ridjal Noor's *Anil*, and the powerful use of irony in Yvonne Tham's *Modhi's Crows*, when an ornithologist ends up on a committee to get rid of crows. In Dashini Ann Jeyathurai's *Diagrams*, Devi quips, *Well, I've got a successful marital alliance to make*, but first she has to do one last thing.

Other stories are about a quest like in Barbara Craven's *Caribou*, a story about a woman rediscovering herself and her abilities, and how far she would go to achieve a dream, even if it might be, as in the words of a highway flagman, *a fool's errand*, which could also be said for the husband who is hunting a mythical bird in the Australian outback in Jennifer Gay Albertson's *The Elusive Iridescence of the Invisible Impossible* (my favorite title by the way), while she basks at the campsite, enchanted by the colors and sounds that lifts her spirit, as she finally asks her husband, *But didn't you hear it sing?* Then there is John Tribbett's *Sneaking onto the Top of the World*, who vividly captures the frustration and realities of a traveler trying to get himself into Tibet one way or another, or Nora Adam's *Pieces of Us*, about a couple struggling through life with their own disabilities – *I am his eyes and he is my ears* – in their quest to have a child.

There are also stories about an ordeal, like the young man who is confronted by a father bent on punishing his son while the mother tries to return his stolen pair of shoes in Mohamad Mohamad-Sharin's *The Sandal Thief*, or what the character has to go through in order to obtain a marriage certificate in India in Ashish Kulshreshtha's *The Marriage Certificate*, with the telling line by Raghav, who when accused of *pimping for the system*, calmly replies, *Remember we just disagreed on the price... we all know there are only two ways of getting stuff done – pay up or use your contacts.*

Some stories deal with the horrible consequences of war like Isnam Taljic's *Silent Death*, a haunting story about death and survival in Bosnia, and Kumiko's *We All Laughed*, about a nameless war-zone where broken spirits are temporarily lifted by a man with mangled legs, who then notes, *There are no such things as war heroes or war criminals. The only difference between the two is the side you're on...*

Other stories deal with the lighter aspects of life, like where to eat your favorite crab, as in *The Majestic Crab*, Yvonne Tham's marvelous story: *Let the hungry masses come, they seemed to be saying as they ballooned the white tablecloths, let them who wait so longingly taste these gastronomic delights.* Or Nadine Sarreal's *The Ruby Earrings*, a romp about a missing pair of earrings and where they end up, or M SHAMmughalingam's *Rahman's Tour of the Treasury*, the unraveling of a Malaysian Civil Service Officer's confidence, and Julia Courtenay's *Learning to be a Tai Tai*, a funny, episodic account of searching for that perfect maid.

Since all 25 stories are realistic and mostly deal with serious subjects – like main courses in a fine meal (all 25 of them) – I wanted to end this collection with something light, a delicious dessert, that allows the reader to reflect back on the time not long ago when people seemed to make up stories for fun instead of making them so real as to blur the line between fiction and reality. So as a bonus I added a 26th story, Devena

Kasinathan's *The Story-Catcher*, which truly is fun to read. Yet, at the same time the title character discusses this very notion, what is real and what is 'fiction', as well as the eternal question as to where do stories come from, and who gets to write these stories. Oh, I had wished that The Story-Catcher's sister had chosen me to write this tale, but alas she chose Devena.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Raman Krishnan for inviting me to edit this collection (on very short notice and for a very rushed deadline), and Sharon Bakar for sharing her advice and tips that she learned from editing *Collateral Damage*. I would also like to thank Zarina Mustafa for using her printer and for her thorough proofreading and catching far too many oversights that I and the writers care to admit (and also under my own rushed deadline), as well as Jenny Cynthia Henson for organizational consultation (how do I go about doing this!) and computer related troubleshooting (on call at all hours), as well as all those on Silverfish's end who are putting this into book form. But most of all I want to thank the writers whom I've been working with, for being open to my suggestions (or being firm enough to stand up for what they believe in), for being patient with me for e-mailing them back and forth, and ultimately for working with me to bring these stories together for your reading or dining pleasure.

Bon appetit!

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For more information, writing tips, articles and biography about Robert Raymer, visit www.BorneoExpatWriter.com