

Below is a full introduction by Robert Raymer himself about his collection of short stories, *Lovers and Strangers Revisited*. To buy the book, visit www.BorneoExpatWriter.com

Introduction to *Lovers and Strangers Revisited* By Robert Raymer

When I first moved to Malaysia twenty years ago, I was fortunate to have lived in a medium-income terrace house where I had a Malay family on my right, a Chinese family on my left, a Tamil family directly across from me, a Punjabi family three houses away in one direction, and three houses in the other, a Chinese woman married to an Indian man who were both Christian. Each of the four streets in this housing area had Malays, Chinese, and Indians living side-by-side – a mini Malaysia at my doorstep. While living in such close proximity to my neighbors, I was able to observe their comings and goings, and they were able to observe mine. They would regularly invite me into their homes to celebrate birthdays, open houses, and other festive occasions. They would ask me about my life, and I would ask them about theirs. It was a great learning experience. I was also able to watch from close up their weddings, their funerals, and their feuds with their spouses. I could watch their children playing badminton or squabbling among themselves. One day a neighbor frantically ran into my house and upstairs to my office in dire need for me to tie his necktie because his wife wasn't around to help him.

I also came to the rescue of a Chinese neighbor when I heard his persistent moaning. In an effort to kill himself, he had drunk the weed-killer paraquat. He was still breathing, so I contacted another neighbor and we rushed him to the hospital. I stayed with him for a couple of hours while he was on his deathbed, and upon returning home, I found several of my neighbors standing outside his gate gossiping about the family. When the man's wife and daughter returned home from shopping, all of them refused to 'get involved', so I was left with the distressing task of informing them of the man's death. Although I left myself out as a character, I used that experience as the basis for my story, *Neighbors*. My original goal in writing this story and others in *Lovers and Strangers– Revisited* was to depict Malaysia not from the viewpoint of an outsider, an expat generalizing from a distance, but as a connected through-marriage insider. Thus I felt comfortable writing about characters like Yeoh, a Chinese man with bitter memories of the Japanese Occupation, who was being teased by the neighborhood children in *The Watcher*; or an Indian child's jealousy of her elder sister's special treatment in *Sister's Room*; or, even a Malay child's curiosity over a dead cockroach in *Symmetry*.

Over the years I made numerous trips to my ex-wife's kampong in Perak and to the kampongs of her extended family. Through her and her family, I learned how the rural Malays lived, how they celebrated with a *kenduri*, how they buried their dead, how they believed in superstitions and spirits, and why they sometimes consulted a *bomoh*, a traditional healer, mystic and witch doctor. This knowledge allowed me to climb inside the head of Rosmah, who was in despair over the fate of her dying husband in *Smooth Stones*; or Ida, who felt betrayed when her father took a second wife in *Home for Hari Raya*; or, even Matemah, a blind, elderly woman navigating her way through a graveyard in *The Stare*.

Even when I used the viewpoint of a Western character, as I did in *On Fridays* and *The Future Barrister*, I tried to use them almost passively, to serve the story, as opposed to having them be the centers of attention.

These pieces eventually became *Lovers and Strangers*, a collection of short stories set in Malaysia and Singapore, published by Heinemann Asia in 1993.

Lovers and Strangers – Revisited contains revised versions of these stories. This book came about in September 2005 when I received an email from Dr. Rashidi Pakri, who after introducing himself, wrote that he was teaching one of my short stories, *On Fridays*, in his Singaporean and Malaysian Literature English course at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), where I also teach Creative Writing. Later, over lunch, he casually mentioned that he planned to use my collection *Lovers and Strangers* for a course named Style in Contemporary Literature the following semester. Again, I was very flattered, but there was a problem. *Lovers and Strangers* went out of print in the mid-1990s a few years after Heinemann Asia was bought out by Reed International (Singapore) and then bought out again by another publisher who decided to drop the Writing in Asia series. So, I contacted Raman Krishnan of Silverfish Books in Kuala Lumpur, whom I had worked with the previous year when I was the editor for *Silverfish New Writings 4*, an anthology of mostly Malaysian and Singaporean short stories. Raman agreed to re-issue the book.

The original drafts of the fifteen stories that were published in *Lovers and Strangers* were mostly written from the years 1985-1990 and first published in magazines and journals in Malaysia and Singapore. During the past decade, in my efforts to get the individual stories published beyond Southeast Asia, I would every couple of years revise all but a few of the stories. So I wasn't keen to use the stories as originally published in the collection, since as it turned out, they were early drafts of work that were starting to get published in Australia, Europe and the USA.

I then contemplated a thorough revision of all of the stories. I was bolstered by the fact that fourteen of fifteen stories have been published 54 times in nine countries; three have been translated into Japanese, and two that I know of have been taught in schools – one a high school in Canada and now a university in Malaysia. The stories seem to have taken on a life of their own ... in some ways, it feels like the characters I had created twenty years ago don't want to be forgotten; they insist that their stories be told.

So once again, I took a hard look at each story. Several of them I hadn't looked at since they were published a dozen years ago. Fortunately, many were better than I had remembered, though I could see weaknesses here and there. A few needed an overhaul. I replaced one story with another that was supposed to be in the original collection, but I had made a switch at the last minute, a regret. In hindsight, these original stories proved to be my training ground as a writer of fiction.

When I was invited to be the editor of *Silverfish New Writing 4*, I felt honored to be a judge of Malaysian literature. I was surprised by the quality and scope of some of the stories, including a few written by expats who felt a special connection to Malaysia. In deciding which stories to include, I established sixteen criteria that I was looking for in my final selection. I then got to thinking about my own short stories. Were they just okay or good – not just by regional standards, but good enough to be published in Europe or the USA where I would be competing with thousands of other writers writing about subjects closer to home? I would also be vying for the attention of editors for whom Malaysia and Singapore would be *terra incognita*.

Also, in the years since *Lovers and Strangers* came out, I began to teach writing at USM, and through this work I became all too aware of the mistakes beginning writers make. I've observed how language can lift a humble story or how carelessness in details and grammar can

sink a promising story faster than the Titanic. I applied what I taught and learned to my own writing. It's the constant desire to improve my writing that drives me. With that sense of purpose, I began working with a Lucy Friedland, a freelance editor from the States, who has had extended stays in Penang. She previously edited several of my unpublished novels, so I asked her to give these short stories an honest, brutal evaluation. Humbling as this process was for me, given that most of the stories had already been published several times, I found the experience invaluable.

As I began to revise the stories for this new collection, it was the perfect opportunity to fine tune the language, to describe scenes more accurately, and to make the writing more precise. It was also a chance to get to know my characters a little better and to understand further their failings and their failed relationships, so the reader, who may not know their culture, would have a clearer picture as to why they were doing what they were doing in the stories. It was also an opportunity for me to revisit my past, not just as a writer, but who I was, where I lived, and what I had experienced and learned from living in Malaysia.

The hardest part was that so much had changed for me since I first wrote these stories. Many of the memories that had inspired particular scenes, settings, or even the characters themselves have become bittersweet, including my own failings as a husband. For one, I was no longer married to the woman that I wrote about in the memoir-ish story, *Mat Salleh*. Still, I kept faithful to the original story and to the other stories, recalling how I felt back when I first created them. At the same time, I came to appreciate these memories, particularly the kampong visits to my mother-in-law's house, as privileged experiences.

One other area I wrestled with was the fact that life in Malaysia itself had changed in the intervening twenty years since I began writing the first drafts of these stories. For example, the Station Hotel had been upgraded and its lobby was moved to the ground floor, inside the restaurant. The hotel is now called The Heritage Station Hotel Kuala Lumpur. I tried to keep the stories in their original mid-80s, early-90s timeframe; yet, at the same time, I tried to make the stories feel *timeless*, so even twenty years from now they would still capture the essence of Malaysia. One omission that I purposely made was not featuring the ubiquitous cell phone in any of my stories. It was a conscious choice; otherwise, I would have felt compelled to update the stories with computers, emails, text messaging, and the latest gadgets or fashion . . . a never-ending process.

In October 2005, I was invited to speak to 120 Humanities students in a Question-and-Answer session about my short story, *On Friday*. I was asked why I had made changes throughout the revised version I had read – a version that had recently been published simultaneously in *The Literary Review (USA)* and *Frank (France)*, via a literary joint-venture. I explained that the changes added depth to the story and addressed questions that had arisen following readings in the past. Many of the questions were from expats new to Malaysia or unfamiliar with certain cultural aspects or religious taboos raised in the story.

“But who are you writing for?” another student asked, as if I was selling out my Malaysian readership. I answered by relating a similar query posed by one of my writing students from Nigeria who was studying in Malaysia. She was questioning the reason for some of the changes I had suggested in her short story set in Nigeria that was eventually published in *Silverfish New Writing 4*. “Since you are Nigerian,” I had told her, “you are writing for Nigeria, so all the details in the story have to ring true for Nigerians; but you are ultimately writing for the world.”

During previous readings of the early version of *On Fridays*, expats had asked, why didn't the protagonist in the taxi just touch her hand? What's the big deal? If the concerns of the protagonist about his being arrested hadn't been clarified, they may not have made sense to the editors in the USA or in France, who were unfamiliar with Malaysia. The publishers may not have run it, and the international readers of those two journals (which have both print and online editions) would have missed the chance to read a story about Malaysians sharing a taxi – which is more than just a taxi. It's a metaphor for multiracial Malaysia, where people of various races can live and work in close proximity and in relative harmony.

After finding out that I had revised all of the stories in the original collection, a lecturer in the audience asked me if I ran the risk of making the stories not better but worse. There's always that risk, I had replied, like cooking a favorite dish but adding too many spices. But chefs are notorious for improvising when necessary, and their latest creation may turn out to be a new culinary delight named after them. For me, rewriting the stories has been a culmination of twenty-five years of writing, twenty years of living in Malaysia, and ten years of teaching creative writing. With *Lovers and Strangers – Revisited*, I'm presenting the latest incarnation of my stories, freshly seasoned, to readers – both new and returning – in Malaysia and beyond.

**For more of Robert Raymer's writing tips and creative writing articles,
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