

This is a *new, extensively rewritten and shortened introduction* for Robert Raymer's book "Lovers & Strangers Revisited".

INTRODUCTION to Lovers & Strangers Revisited

By Robert Raymer

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When I first moved to Malaysia over 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 new 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 and open houses. 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 observe from close up their weddings, their funerals, their festive celebrations and their family feuds. I watched their children play badminton, squabble among themselves, and occasionally get knocked down by a passing motorcycle.

One day I came to the aid of a Chinese neighbor when I heard his persistent moaning. In an attempt 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 several hours while he was on his deathbed. 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 task of having to inform them of the man's death. I used that experience as the basis for my story, 'Neighbours', now being taught as part of the 6th cycle for SPM English Literature in Malaysia. 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 and as a neighbor. 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, and also how they believed in superstitions and spirits and sometimes consulted *bomohs*, a traditional healer, mystic, 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, I tried to use them almost passively, to serve the story, as opposed to having them be the centers of attention, as I did in ‘The Future Barrister’, or ‘On Fridays’, a story about Malaysians sharing a taxi, a metaphor for multiracial Malaysia, where people of various races live and work in close proximity and in relative harmony.

These pieces eventually became *Lovers and Strangers*, a collection of short stories set in Malaysia and Singapore, published by Heinemann Asia in 1993, and then *Lovers and Strangers Revisited*, a heavily revised version published by Silverfish Books in 2005. Revising these stories was 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 for nearly half of my life. 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 semi-autobiographical 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 then mother-in-law’s house, as privileged experiences.

For this third, revised edition of *Lovers and Strangers Revisited* published by MPH, I have added two stories written during the same period from 1985-1990, including one set in Thailand. One concern that I had was the fact that life in Malaysia and Southeast Asia 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 is now

called The Heritage Station Hotel Kuala Lumpur, and its lobby moved to the ground floor, inside the restaurant. I tried to keep the stories in their original mid-80s, early-90s time frame, 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.

For me, rewriting the stories has been a culmination of over twenty-five years of writing, twenty years of living in Malaysia, and ten years of teaching creative writing. So far 16 of the 17 stories have been published 62 times in nine countries. Three have been translated into Japanese. Five stories have been taught in four universities in Malaysia, in secondary schools throughout Malaysia (SPM English Literature) and a high school in Canada. *Lovers and Strangers Revisited* is now being taught at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

With this third edition of *Lovers and Strangers Revisited*, I'm presenting the latest incarnation of my stories—stories that seem to have taken on a life of their own as if the characters that I had created didn't want to be forgotten; they wanted their stories retold.

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