

**Beth Yahp, *The Red Pearl and Other Stories*. Newtown, NSW, Australia, Vagabond Press, 2017. 222 pp. ISBN 9781922181510.**

**Beth Yahp, *Eat First, Talk Later: A Memoir of Food, Family and Home*. Petaling Jaya: Gerakbudaya, 2019. 350 pp. ISBN 9789670311227. [First published by Vintage Random House Australia, 2015]**

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**B**eth Yahp's collection of short stories, *The Red Pearl and Other Stories*, is a poststructuralist critic's dream – here are stories that you the reader will have to painstakingly piece together from the fractured, fragmented narratives; but you never quite figure out what the story actually is in the end because most of the stories are open-ended and whatever semblance of plot there is, you too will have to assemble from slivers of narrative scattered seemingly at random. Meaning is constantly delayed, deferred, or one might even say spurned, by the constant shifting of perspectives and the narrative dislocation in these stories. Fragments of ideas, evocations of states of being, states of the mind and states of the heart, a furtive spurt of action, are all thrown at you in dizzying succession. The stories span most of Yahp's writing career and it is evident from this collection that a non-linear approach to story-telling, so insistently graven into the structure of her debut novel, *Crocodile Fury*, published in 1992, is an integral part of the writer's creative DNA.

In some of the stories, this approach works very well to evoke the idea of a frenetic search for meaning and perspective in a fractured world, perhaps a reflection of the individual societies, whether it be Australian or Malaysian, that the author is trying to portray, or even a reflection of the author's inner self. The obsession with non-linearity is clearly on display in "Time and Again", with sections named first "Day 9", then "Day 6", then "Day 2", and so on, as if the writer were trying her level best to defy once and for all the tyranny of time, and the tyranny of logical structure in the way one experiences the world, or in the way one articulates one's experience of the world.

This volume largely comes across as a collection of experiments in form and technique rather than earnest attempts at story-telling. This preoccupation with style and technique is also to be seen in *Crocodile Fury*, although there, the writer has a concrete enough story to tell, which prevents style and technique from taking over so completely as they do here. Constraints of space in these stories also rein in the exuberant superfluity of detail and repetitiveness that sometimes overwhelm the narrative in *Crocodile Fury*.

In the title story of the collection, “Red Pearl”, the writer largely abandons a deliberate fragmentation of the narrative to focus on a mostly uninterrupted account of love-making and the sexual and emotional tension between a sailor and his lover. Like the protagonists in *Crocodile Fury*, the two protagonists in “Red Pearl” are not given names; and this is also the case in a number of other stories in the collection, like the old man in “Homeland”, the woman in “On Rose Street”, and the first-person narrators in “The Other Room”, “In 1969”, and “Dogs in Love.” Even in those stories where the protagonists have names, the writer does not develop them enough into characters you can empathise with and they serve largely as scaffolding for evocations of states of mind, states of being and ideas. In most of the stories in the collection, the writer is more preoccupied with capturing moments in time, with disrupting time itself as well as the flow of time and events, rather than with the business of giving the reader a good story. Perhaps some of what she is trying to do with these stories is more appropriately done in poetry.

The one exception to all this is the longest story in the collection, “Point of No Return”, an account of a teenage girl’s, Bel’s, sexual awakening and her relationship with her boyfriend Deen. Unlike all the other stories in the collection, this one is grounded in real life, with a very concrete setting in a Malaysia caught up in the throes of a rising tide of conservative public morality mediated by Islam. The account of the pair exploring their sexuality and Bel subsequently getting pregnant and having an abortion is interspersed by snippets of text that both characters read ostensibly from newspapers and other publications containing accounts of rape victims, a raid by the Islamic morality police on a party, and moral pronouncements with a prurient fixation on virginity and the condition of the female genitalia.

It appears that real life, rather than fiction, is what really inspires Yahp to spin a good yarn. Her account of her own life as well as those of her parents in her memoir *Eat First, Talk Later* is engaging in a way that none of the stories in *The Red Pearl* collection probably aspires to. Much of the text follows the narrator and her parents, Peter and Mara, as they embark on a road trip in Malaysia, with constant flashbacks to episodes in Peter’s, Mara’s and the narrator’s life, interspersed by accounts of the narrator’s relationship with Jing the political activist, who is realized quite fully as the fourth major character in the text. The narrator portrays Peter, Mara, Jing, as well as herself, in wry, largely unsentimental prose. Spliced into all this are snippets of Malaysian history, from the time of the Melakan Sultanate right up to the present time in the narrative, the 2004 Malaysian general election.

This memoir of “food, family and home” is as much a fusion as is the cuisine that supposedly is one of the subjects of the book. Unfortunately, Malaysian food seems to have inspired the writer as much as fiction has in *The Red Pearl*. Not only is there really very little about food in the text, much of the account of food in the book comes across as somewhat clichéd. Most of the time, Yahp makes general references to Malaysian food, rather

than to particular experiences of eating the food, and there is a certain blandness about the way food is represented. The text does not evoke gastronomic experiences nor does it quite capture the essence of how food is woven into the fabric of Malaysian life or even that of the narrator and her parents.

The passage about *yong tau fu* in Chapter One, for example, gives you a bare definition of the dish as “bite-sized slices of bitter melon and eggplant, ladies fingers and long red chillies, tofu squares and skin, all stuffed with succulent fish paste” (20-22). The writer notes that this is one of Peter’s favourite dishes and describes the establishment in Ampang where the family would eat it. There is, however, no actual account of the experience of eating this or any *yong tau fu*, no recollection of the family actually sitting down and enjoying a particular *yong tau fu* meal. Instead much of this passage is given over to an account of the Hakka people, Peter’s forebears, amongst whom *yong tau fu* originated.

One crucial detail about food that betrays the writer’s position as very much now the outsider coming back to make sense of her relationship with her home country is a Glossary entry at the end of the book. *Wantan mee* is glossed as “a noodle dish usually served in a hot broth, garnished with leafy vegetables, and meat or prawn wonton dumplings. Sometimes served dry, with broth on the side.” This is absolutely correct as a gloss of wonton noodles served in Hong Kong or Guangzhou or establishments in Australia set up by immigrants from Hong Kong. *Wantan mee* in Malaysia is by default the “dry” version, freshly made egg noodles tossed in soy sauce and lard garnished with *choy sum*, *char siew* (which is never part of the Hong Kong/Guangzhou version), with the wonton served in an accompanying bowl of soup.

Also in the Glossary, *char kuey teow*, a stir-fried noodle dish, Hokkien in origin as well as in name, is glossed as “Cantonese” whilst in the gloss of the Malay take on this, *kuey teow kampung*, the *kuey teow* bit, referring to rice noodles, is correctly identified as Hokkien. There is also a cryptic entry for “*kuih talap*” in the Glossary, which makes you think this is a typo for *kuih talam* – a steamed *kuih* with a pandan flavoured mung bean and rice flour layer topped by a layer of coconut and rice flour – until you realize that the gloss describes *ketayap*, pandan flavoured crêpes with a *gula melaka* and coconut filling. The gloss ends with an alternative (and correct) name for this dessert, *kuih dadar*.

On the very last page, Peter urges the narrator to hurry up with a photo so they can get on with the journey to Penang from Lumut. The narrator, irritated because she would rather take the ferry across to Pangkor Island first for a quick look, drops another shibboleth:

‘I need *kopi susu kao* first,’ I mutter, still scowling. Strong condensed milk coffee, squeezed through a muslin bag on a round metal frame, like a miniature windsock. So thick your teaspoon could stand up by itself. (326)

Malaysians ordering coffee with milk would just say *kopi* because that is the default. If you want black coffee, you tag on the Hokkien word for black and say *kopi o*. And if you want your coffee strong, you add *kau* at the end. The Malay word for milk, *susu*, is just NOT part of *kopitiam* (coffee shop) parlance, even when it is a Malay speaker making the order. And of course no one would risk scalding their hand by trying to squeeze the coffee out of the muslin bag, unless by that, the writer means to refer to the up and down motion of our *kopitiam* barista's hand as he deftly draws the muslin bag through the coffee that has already percolated into a large can to extract the maximum amount of flavour out of the grounds.

The writer has made a fair stab at weaving the two strands of personal and national history in this book into an engaging narrative, drawing out of the whole fabric of the text provocative questions about her own identity as well as the identity of Malaysia as a nation. In the wry, sometimes journalistic tone of the narrative, there is none of the exoticizing of Southeast Asia that you find in *Crocodile Fury* or the title story of *The Red Pearl* collection. The failure of the text to dish out the food in the way suggested by the title as well as the subtitle, does not ultimately compromise this largely successful exploration of how self, family and nation are interwoven, but perhaps it does ultimately say something about the writer's identity and the distance she has travelled since leaving Malaysia to become one of a growing number of émigré writers from our shores making their mark elsewhere.