

**Malachi Edwin Vethamani, *Have I Got Something To Tell You*, Singapore: Penguin Random House SEA, 2024. 234 pp. ISBN 978-9-815-14485-7.**

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Malachi Edwin Vethamani's latest short story collection *Have I Got Something to Tell You* (2024) published by Penguin Books gives voice to the marginalised, and an insight into their internal worlds. As with his other collections, both short stories and poetry, Vethamani writes about complex human emotions. Consisting of a mix of old and new short stories, this collection explores a range of topics from gender and sexuality to race with a mix of wit and Vethamani's characteristic minimalist writing style, peopled with memorable, intriguing, and well-written characters.

As with the rest of his body of work, Vethamani focuses heavily on themes of love and sex, especially in the lives of those marginalised in Malaysia, either due their gender or sexual identity, or because they refuse to conform to rigid social expectations. Often, his characters rebel against social norms by blazing their own paths in life and love, often leading to disaster. Despite the largely tragic nature of his stories, he also manages to infuse a sense of hope into them. As a result, even in the face of loss of love and life, there is the possibility of a change for the better.

More than anything, this collection is a celebration of the diversity of masculinities. Apart from challenging stereotypes of gay men as well as Malaysian Indian men, Vethamani demonstrates the complexities of these identities as well as of masculinities in general. The

characters are intriguing and appear larger than life, proving the power of the author's ability to bring these characters to life using his minimalist writing style. In writing these men, the author validates and even celebrates the existence of so many who are forced to mask their true selves to protect themselves, whether they are making this choice due to their homosexuality or to satisfy their parents' and society's expectations of them. By presenting these captivating and unapologetic men, this collection provides honest portrayals of a variety of masculinities, demonstrating that masculinity is more dynamic and diverse than we expect.

What I was most impressed about is how well-written the female characters felt. As a female reader, I am so often disappointed and even enraged at the characters male authors come up with when writing women. However, Vethamani achieves this feat with no problem, writing characters that his female readers can relate to and can even see themselves in. This is most evident in 'Coitus Interruptus', a story previously published in his collection *Coitus Interruptus and Other Stories* (2018), the female protagonist Sunitha feels like a real woman who could exist in real life. This realistic portrayal of female characters is testament to the author's keen observational skills in writing women.

In his stories, his characters are constantly pushing back against stereotypes and actively fighting back against labels. Whether it's his male characters such as Rohan, Balan, and Nandan who accept their sexuality and attempt to be true to themselves, or his female characters such as Sunitha, Prema and Shanti who refuse to conform to societal expectations of femininity and are trying to live authentically. However, it is not only constraints of gender and sexuality against which Vethamani's characters rebel. They also challenge the rigid socio-political landscape of Malaysia that refuses to allow much mingling of the races and religions: Bala and Rashidah's interracial love story in 'In Close Proximity' is at once an idealistic yet heartrending tale with a tragic end. Characters such as Rama, Johan, and Ganesh and their

experiences demonstrate the complexities of Malaysian identity and examine how generational trauma and strife can stem from cultural ideas surrounding race and religion.

Even in his stories of characters battling with stereotypes and challenges relating to their gender identity or sexuality, race and religion play important roles, adding further layers of complexity to the characters. This is where Vethamani's short stories are unique as the characters are not just grappling with their gender identity and sexuality but the intersection of these with the concepts of race and religion in the highly tumultuous political and religious framework of Malaysian society. As such, his stories provide an interesting inside look into the lives of those whose entire existence is perceived as taboo and 'wrong'. A perfect example of this is Surin in the final short story, 'Sex and Politics in the Time of Lockdown', who finds out that he is likely HIV-AIDS positive as a result of his sexual relationship with another man. In a country where homosexuality is considered both immoral and illegal, thereby deeming the HIV/AIDS crisis, that is seen as largely affecting the LGBTIQ+ community, as hardly worth discussing, Vethamani brings attention to those left behind. In telling their stories, the author is able to present these people as they are: regular people with real worries and concerns just like the rest of us. In doing so, he also dispels myths and propaganda surrounding homosexual men and demonstrates that they are as normal and susceptible to deadly viruses, just as the rest of us are, as exemplified by the crisis created by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Through the many characters with marginalised sexual, gender, and racial identities struggling in a society incapable of loving them and unwilling to accept them as they are, Vethamani offers delightful insights into their complex and hidden lives, dispelling stereotypes of their perceived wrongness and monstrosity. Even when it comes to his portrayals of heteronormative relationships, Vethamani treats his characters with the same level of care, advocating for a more compassionate approach to viewing others. Above all, this collection is

a reminder to celebrate people and love in all their forms. All this makes *Have I Got Something To Tell You* the ideal summer read to immerse yourself in, as its release coincides with Pride Month, a global celebration of LGBTIQ+ people and their contributions to the world. Whether one is an ally or not, this is an incredible collection of literary fiction that interrogates what we truly value as a society and overtly challenges the notion that there is only one way to be.