

Kumpulan Kebudayaan Malaysia Kuala Lumpur & Selangor Malaysian Culture Group

Newsletter of the Malaysian Culture Group

April 2011

MCG PROGRAM OF EVENTS

FIRST WEDNESDAY OF THE MONTH LECTURE : UNITY IN DIVERSITY : THE ORANG ASLI OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA	Wednesday, 06 April
VISIT TO ORANG ASLI MUSEUM	Wednesday, 13 April
INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE : KATHAK	Tuesday, 19 April
MCG ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING	Wednesday, 04 May

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JULIE EDWARDS**

MCG sadly advises our members of the sudden passing of Julie Edwards on February 27th in her home town of Melbourne. During her time in KL, Julie was an active and enthusiastic member of MCG and also part of the Events Planning Team. She was much loved and appreciated for

her sense of adventure and generous nature. We extend our condolences to her family and friends.

The deadline for the May 2011 issue is April 8. Please send event reports for the next issue to the appropriate event convenor. If you have other material of interest to members that you would like us to include, please send it to: newsletter@malaysianculturegroup.org

IMPORTANT NOTICE

All information contained in this newsletter is for the exclusive use of Malaysian Culture Group Members only. Permission must be obtained from the President of MCG for use of this material in any other publication in hardcopy or electronic form.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

A few words about our MCG Library.....

Are you aware that MCG owns a large library of over 700 books? This is an interesting collection covering subjects related to Malaysia and Southeast Asia, fiction and non-fiction, some signed editions, some very old and out-of-print, some encyclopedias, and some DVDs. They are currently housed at the National Museum (Muzium Negara, Jalan Damansara) in the Museum Volunteers Malaysia (MVM) room on the first floor of the Annex. Our books are looked after by a small staff of MVM library volunteers and are available to us for check-out on Tuesday mornings from 10 am to 12 noon. A volunteer will help you search for and sign out books. The Museum Volunteers also use the library as a resource center and for training purposes.

Both MCG and MVM add to the collection periodically and we are always looking for donations which can be left at the Library in a special donation box. The catalogue for this library is available on our website in the 'Library' section. Please note on the inside of the book that it is an 'MCG' donation. These will be added later to our catalogue by the Library staff.

The Book Group Convenor acts as the Library liaison and can be contacted at bookgroup@malaysianculturegroup.org if there are questions or if additional help is needed.

Why not visit our Library to see for yourself what an extensive collection we have and sign out a book or two. Books may be checked out for three weeks at a time. Happy Reading!

Joanne Mahendran
Book Group Convenor

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Malaysia Culture Group Annual General Meeting

Your attendance is requested at this important meeting

Voice your opinion! Make your vote count!

Wednesday, 4th May, 2011

10 AM Start

National Textile Museum

26 Jln Sultan Hishamuddin (Dataran Merdeka)

The AGM proceedings will be followed by an exclusive screening of

“ Aku Siapa ”

a new documentary about why Muslim women wear the hijab.

The Director, Norhayati Kaprawi will lead a discussion after the screening.

We invite you to join us for this special event

followed by coffee and refreshments

Support your organization

Please register by emailing Michelle at

veep@malaysianculturegroup.org

Watch for more information about this event in the next newsletter.

If you are interested in serving on the Malaysian Culture Group Committee,
please contact a committee member.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

“Aku Siapa” (Who Am I?)

A new documentary by Malaysian filmmaker
Norhayati Kaprawi

Why do some women wear the hijab and some take it off?

Through a series of candid interviews with Muslim women, religious scholars, academics and politicians, “Aku Siapa” uncovers what women understand about the hijab and the Quranic verses that compel them to cover up.

“Aku Siapa” enlightens us on the phenomenon of the hijab and its development within Islam and in Malaysia.

Norhayati Kaprawi is the program manager of Sisters in Islam, a Malaysian women’s rights advocacy group.

She uses popular media to promote Muslim women’s rights and progressive thinking in Islam.

MCG is honoured that Norhayati will provide us with an exclusive screening of her new film, followed by questions and answers. Don’t miss this exciting chance to be informed about one of the major issues in the world today.

The screening of “*Aku Siapa*” will follow the AGM
10am May 4, 2011
at the National Textile Museum

To register for the AGM, email
veep@malaysianculturegroup.org

UPCOMING EVENTS

FIRST WEDNESDAY OF THE MONTH LECTURE: UNITY IN DIVERSITY - THE ORANG ASLI OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

DATE: **Wednesday, 06 April 2011**
 TIME: **10.00 am for 10.30 am start**
 PLACE: **Meritz Condominium, Jalan Mayang**
 COST: **Members RM15, Guests RM25**
 RSVP: mcgevents@yahoo.com



The Orang Asli are not homogenous. With 18 official ethnic groups, these are a diverse people with numerous languages, culture & belief systems. Yet, despite their differences, they share many things in common. Being indigenous minorities (with the smallest, the Kanaq of Johor at one time only had 44 individuals), their collective identity goes beyond woven head-dresses and blowpipes. Orang Asli today try very hard to maintain their languages, traditional beliefs, crafts & culture in a wired world. In this talk, we will showcase their own efforts to maintain their cultural heritage in order to better understand who the Orang Asli are and how they struggle to balance modernity & tradition.

We will be hearing from Reita Rahim, who is the founder and co-ordinator of Gerai Orang Asli (Gerai OA), a non-profit mobile stall selling Orang Asli and Orang Asal handicrafts, plus books/cds/video documentaries for educational purposes. Reita travels all over Malaysia sourcing from many villages and is instrumental in helping crafts people with designs to suit the Kuala Lumpur market.

VISIT TO ORANG ASLI MUSEUM

DATE: **Wednesday, 13 April 2011**
 TIME: **Depart from KL 9.30 am (car pooling will be arranged)**
 PLACE: **Km 24, Jalan Pahang, Gombak**
 COST: **Members RM15, Guests RM25**
 RSVP: mcgevents@yahoo.com



(When registering please advise if you are willing to take extra people in your car as well as from which part of town you will be leaving – thank you)

We are coordinating the talk on 06 April about the native people living in Malaysia with a visit the following week to the Aboriginal People Museum in Gombak, some 24 km. from Batu Caves.

The Museum houses displays of the dwellings, personal adornments, arts, costumes, musical instruments, hunting and agricultural tools, animal traps and traditional medicine of the various tribes of the Orang Asli. The Orang Asli population is divided into three main ethnic groups, the Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay which are further divided into six tribes each; the Semai tribe under the Proto-Malays is the largest with a population of 42,383 who live in Kuala Lipis and Raub in Pahang as well as Slim River and Kinta in Perak.

The new brick built building which houses the Museum was opened in 1998 and is operated by the Orang Asli Affairs Department (JHEOA) who are justly proud of this somewhat unknown but fascinating glimpse into the lives of people with whom we share this country but know so little about.

INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE: KATHAK

DATE: **Tuesday, 19 April 2011**
 TIME: **10.30 am for 11 am start (Note the Time)**
 PLACE: **Indian Cultural Centre (ICC)**
 CapSquare Signature Office B (Level 1) Jalan Munshi Abdullah
 COST: **Members RM15, Guests RM25**
 RSVP: mcgevents@yahoo.com



The Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) opened to the public in 2009 to showcase India's rich heritage and promote cultural exchanges between peoples of Malaysia and India; and is the cultural wing of the Indian High Commission. As such, classes at ICC include yoga, Kathak dance, Tabla, Carnatic vocal music and Hindi language.

Kathak is one of the eight major classical Indian dance forms and is the principal classical dance of North India. The word kathak means "to tell a story" and is derived from the dance dramas of ancient India. During the Mughal era, there was a change in emphasis from that of telling religious stories to one of entertainment. Today, the dance is an abstract exploration of rhythm and movement, involving complex footwork and pirouettes executed at lightning speed, matched by accompanying percussion instruments. Lucknow, Jaipur and Banaras are recognized as the three schools of Kathak where the interpretative and rhythmic aspects of the dance have been refined to a high standard.

This is a rare opportunity to learn about an ancient art form through an interactive lecture/demo by accomplished teacher Ms. Geetanjali Singh. Please note the slightly later start time for this event.

MALAYSIAN CULTURE GROUP
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

DATE: **Wednesday, 04 May 2011**
 TIME: **9.30 am for 10.00 am start**
 PLACE: **National Textile Museum**
Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin, 50050 KL
 COST: **Members only—no cost**
 RSVP: veep@malaysianculturegroup.org



Your attendance is requested at our
Annual General Meeting

We will be electing a new slate of candidates for the Committee and voting on important revisions to the Constitution.

The AGM proceedings will be followed by an exclusive screening of "Aku Siapa"

a new documentary about why Muslim women wear the hijab.

The Director, Norhayati Kaprawi will lead a discussion after the screening.

We invite you to join us for this special event followed by coffee and refreshments

MEMBERS' CULTURAL CORNER

A WEDDING IN JAIPUR

During one of my regular trips to Delhi last month, I was fortunate to be invited to a wedding in Jaipur. The bride, Priya, was a school friend of my friends' daughter, whom I had met several times over the years. Priya is the product of a mixed marriage, her mother being English, and her father a Rajput from Rajasthan and is a Hindu. She and her groom Pierre both live and work in London. He is French heritage from South Africa and of the Jewish faith.

As is common with Indian weddings, the celebrations can go on for up to a week or more. As the groom was not from India, the number of events was cut down by at least two, which was a relief to me as I had to carry a different outfit for each of them!



The first event after our arrival was an early evening elephant tea

party for the children and an event restricted to those of the same age group as the bride and groom. The big party was held at a farmhouse outside Jaipur, after which they all slept in tents and were expected for brunch next day at 11am. By that time, us oldies had been up for hours and were almost ready for lunch.

Day 2 evening was dinner for all guests (many from South Africa and London) followed by a fabulous Rajasthani folk music concert (which has a strong religious flavour) held in the grounds of the hotel where most of the

wedding events were held and where we were staying. The father of the bride has been very instrumental in keeping alive Rajasthani arts, so hundreds wanted to perform, but perforce, it was kept to the *crème de la crème*.

Day 3 was lunch and mehendi (henna painting of hands/feet) with village ferris wheel, puppet show, balloons etc. for the children. A master henna painter work on the bride's hands up to the elbow and feet and ankles. The painted was very intricate and included the groom's name painted somewhere on the hands. Traditionally he has to find his name once he takes his bride back to his family home after the wedding ceremony. This is a game that is played to make the bride and groom more relaxed and at ease with each other (taken from the days when all marriages were arranged).

All lady guests were able to have some henna painting done if they chose to, and there were Indian bangles to choose to match one of our outfits. Lunch was traditional Rajasthani food served on a plate and small dishes made from leaves. As the bride's family is vegetarian, all the wedding meals were vegetarian. The tastes were very interesting. The main meal was based on the use of pulses or gram flour made into delicious curries and served with fresh vegetables and sweets. I especially liked the *batti*, a hand roasted ball of wheat flour, cracked open and served with plenty of ghee and *churma*, a powdered sweetened cereal.



That evening there was a formal dinner in the grounds of the hotel with *Ghoomar* dancing, the national social folk dance of Rajasthan, danced by women in long full skirts and colourful *chuneris* (squares of cloth draping head and shoulders and tucked in front at the waist).



The next morning, Saturday, was the religious marriage ceremony. It was a beautiful combination of religions, using meaningful rituals from both. It was lovely to see the colourful yarmulkes, a Jewish visual that I rarely see. That evening was another formal dinner with fireworks, speeches, cutting of the cake, a dance previously rehearsed by the children, a humorous skit performed by friends of the bride and groom, and if that wasn't enough, a disco in the meeting hall of the hotel and of course, dinner. The bride and groom arrived for the evening's entertainment in a cycle rickshaw, ridden by the best man and were practically drowned in rose petals. In many instances, the groom would arrive for on a white horse but this was not done as the groom was not Indian, and the rickshaw ride was the next best thing and a lot of fun. Next day was an informal lunch reception for departing guests, and later the departure of the bride and groom.

It was a fabulous experience, and very different from other weddings I have attended in India. The family are very low key and wanted a small, traditional wedding; there wouldn't have been any more than 100 at any event. I can't imagine the work involved in such a big undertaking as not only are they organising the events, the food, the outfits, etc., but also having to take care of the the European guests, arranging cultural and tourist visits to the attractions of Jaipur and of course ensuring the meals are not too spicy! The friends of the bride and groom have to work hard too, coming up with a skit to perform on stage. I enjoyed it all immensely and at the same time was happy to get back to Delhi and some tandoori chicken!

Vicki Fennessy – text and photos

Seen anything interesting in SE Asia recently? Tell us about it and we'll put your story here. Please send us an email at:

mcgnewsletter@yahoo.com



REPORTS ON PREVIOUS EVENTS

Julian Lees Lecture 9/2/11

The very definition of a ‘third culture kid,’ author Julian Lees shared his family history and his passion for writing historical fiction with the MCG group on February 9.

Julian’s easygoing manner and English accent betrayed his unusually exotic international background. Born and raised in Hong Kong, Julian started his career as a novelist by writing a story based loosely on his maternal grandmother’s escape from Bolshevik Russia. His grandmother was a White Russian who fled as a child after the 1917 revolution. She spent her childhood in Harbin, then moved to Shanghai in the 1930s, where she later married Julian’s grandfather, a Chinese/English Eurasian, and had Julian’s mother in 1937.

Julian peppered his lecture with humanizing stories that brought to life his family members’ personalities as they coped with the notable events of the era. When Julian’s mother was a young girl, the Japanese took over Hong Kong after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Her father heard that they were all going to be relocated to internment camps. Thinking ‘camp’ would be something a bit more recreational than it turned out to be, Julian’s grandfather had his tailor make up five pairs of jaunty white trousers.

The exoticism and colonial history of early 20th century Southeast Asia form the background of Julian’s first two novels. He spoke to the group of the challenges of remaining within the boundaries of historical accuracy, particularly regarding the legacies his characters would have left behind. In his first two novels, he learned to respect the limits of his fictional characters, as he found himself having to edit extraneous aspects of their personalities in order to propel the story forward.

Julian and his wife Ming decided to move to KL after watching their sons cope with pollution-related illnesses in Hong Kong. In KL’s slower pace of life, Julian sees a window to Hong Kong’s past, as he remembers it. He is continuing work on his third historical novel, drawing from his and his wife’s interesting family histories for inspiration.

Lauren Massy



Ching Ming

Chinese Ancestors Day is April 5

Stuart Wakefield's First Wednesday of the Month Lecture: Travels with Sooty

Stuart Wakefield presented a fascinating account of his experiences and observations of the Omani people during his 13-year assignment with His Majesty's Royal Flight based in Muscat. At the time, Oman was still a reclusive kingdom and few westerners had heard of it, let alone visited or lived there.



After deposing his father in a 'Palace Coup' in the early 1970s, Sultan Qaboos bin Said set about bringing his country into the twentieth century. His priority was to overcome a determined armed communist insurgency from South Yemen and to build-up the country's infrastructure. Whilst at that time Oman permitted no tourists to enter the country, it possessed many of the fascinating features that had all but disappeared from the other rapidly developing Gulf States.



His Majesty's travels across the Empty Quarter enabled him to maintain contact with isolated communities as well as with the wandering Bedouin, (who may or may not have been his subjects). Accompanying His Majesty on these journeys was a



convoy of vehicles - Range Rovers for the palace staff, fuel trucks, water bowzers, trucks carrying livestock for the kitchens, Royal Guard vehicles and APCs, all manned by numerous Omani staff plus helicopters supported by a small expatriate team, of which Stuart was a part, which catered for the technical and operational requirements. The convoy would criss-cross Oman's vast deserts and mountain ranges to visit the scattered and often remote communities of nomads, shepherds and fisherfolk. At the time, there were no roads, no telephones, no schools, colleges or hospitals outside of the capital, Muscat, and indeed no modern amenities of any kind for the local citizenry.

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There was no knowing how long these travels might take, in which direction the Sultan might turn, where camp would be made, and what difficulties might be encountered, from a shortage of ingredients for the Sultan's preferred dessert of the day, to accidents, breakdowns, illnesses, floods or sandstorms. The Sultan's regular visits to Salalah, a 1000-mile round trip, for example, could easily take up to 6 weeks each leg. While this raised significant logistic and security issues, it also brought Stuart into close and extended



contact with local Omanis and staff from different parts of South Asia and the Middle East, affording him a rare opportunity to observe their

way of life and gain valuable insights into their cultures.



Most striking was to observe the life of the Bedouin tribesmen and experience their unbounded warmth and hospitality in spite of their poverty, intensely hard life, poor diet, lack of any education beyond perhaps some Quranic instruction as children, lack of any sort of modern comfort, and remoteness from even the most basic of health services. These deprivations made for very high infant mortality and short adult life spans. In the words of the explorer Wilfred Thesiger "I have encountered individuals among many races with high standards of conduct, but only among the Bedu were such standards generally observed. I was fortunate to know



them before the discovery of oil in southern Arabia destroyed forever the pattern of their lives. The years I was with them were the most memorable of my life." Stuart noted that, in spite of poor education or training, most of the people he came across assimilated new knowledge very quickly and their language skills were striking.

So who is Sooty? Well, that is something you will have to ask Stuart yourself!

PHOTOS.

Pic 1: Sultan Qaboos bin Said. Source: *Destination Oman 2008*, Universal Press and Publishing, Muscat

Pic 2 : Map of Oman

Pic 3: There are more than 500 forts in Oman– *Photo: Robert Tyabji*

Pic 4: Rugged mountain terrain and remote village – *Photo: Robert Tyabji*

Pic 5: Hilltop fort guarding the oasis below – *Photo: Robert Tyabji*

Pic 6: Crossing the desert – *Photo: Robert Tyabji*

Pic 7: Deserts and mountains – *Photo: Robert Tyabji*

Pic 8: Dhows off the ship building town of Sur– *Photo: Robert Tyabji*

Pic 9: Gazing at the headlands near Sur – *Photo: Robert Tyabji*

Pic 10: Desert mosque– *Photo: Robert Tyabji*

Pic 11: Dawn by the ocean– *Photo: Robert Tyabji*

Pic 12: Kids from the *madrassah*– *Photo: Robert Tyabji*

Robert Tyabji,

A visit to Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah:

Is Songket, a dying art, or could it become a thriving industry in today's global world?

“Gorgeous. Exquisite. Elegant. Enigmatic.” These are the adjectives author, Datin Noor Azlina Yunus uses to describe Malaysia's textile art, songket, in her recently published book, SONGKET REVOLUTION. When we met Datin Noor on Wednesday, 16th February 2011 in the sales rooms of “Tuanku Nur Zahirah Foundation”, 83 Jalan Telawi, Bangsar she expressed a similar enthusiasm.



Many of us knew very little about this prestigious, traditional, hand-woven fabric and it was a delight to watch Datin Noor skillfully dress up her “Princess” Sitti, one of the young Malay saleswomen, with the same bridal songket sarong, breast cloth, selendang (stole) and head scarf she had worn at her Malay wedding 42 years ago. Each rectangular piece of cloth had to be wrapped, folded, tucked or pleated to create the desired effect. While we watched the transformation we could imagine what a magical wedding ceremony it must have been for her, even more so because as a New Zealander she had never experienced anything like that before. Sitti, on the other hand, expressed less enthusiasm. These traditional textiles, as gorgeous as they may be, are stiff, heavy, hot and prickly to wear.

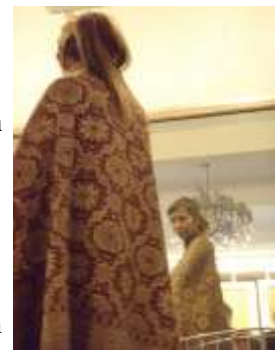


Until the 20 century songket was solely used to make traditional costumes worn by dignitaries at formal palace and state functions and by bridal couples on their wedding day (Raja sehari – “king and queen for the day”). Commoners were prohibited from wearing certain motifs and colours. The royal families employed their own master weavers to create these outstanding works of art, which they wove with silk and golden threads imported from China and India. The women who wove the songket were respected artisans who competed to create the most exquisite designs. They were under no pressure to sell, which gave them the luxury of time to create one-off pieces using their own secret red, black and brown dyes.



Datin Noor Azlina Yunus spent a lot of time explaining the meaning of the different motifs, the size and formal layout of the panels, the origin of the materials and how they were dyed with natural dyes. We also watched a video made by the Foundation Tuanku Nur Zahirah which shows weavers making songket on framed looms taking up to three months to complete just one piece of work.

Datin Noor made it quite clear that songket has become a dying art since the royal families of Malaysia have lost prestige and can no longer afford to employ their own weavers. Although the royal weavers set up ateliers at their own homes this art form is declining as the older songket weavers die and the younger women are not attracted to this poorly paid, time consuming, solitary craft.



Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah was established in June 2007 to put an end to this disconcerting trend. The goals of the foundation are the following:

- . Preserve songket's traditional forms by collecting traditional fabrics and taking special care of them in their museum at the Centre for the Development of Contemporary Songket in Kuala Terengganu.
- . Set up a production and research centre to adapt the fabrics to the requirements of the modern consumer and to speed up the production using computer technology.
- . Assist weaving communities mainly in the east coast state of Terengganu and Sarawak to improve their working conditions so as to attract young weavers.
- . Train young weavers
- . Introduce contemporary brightly hued lightweight songket textiles for high-end fashion, fashion accessories and interiors.

If you want to learn more about songket I can certainly recommend the Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah sales rooms in Bangsar, where you will find a splendid collection of traditional and modern fabrics. You can also buy the book “SONGKET REVOLUTION” there for the price of RM200. Maybe one day the present day cottage industries will become thriving international ventures. In any case, it is always very uplifting to see real “craftwomanship” which explains why so many of us from the Malaysian Culture Group came to listen to this very interesting talk.

Helen Duckworth—text, Ann Robben Dott - photos

EXPLORERS

EXPLORERS' FEBRUARY TRIP TO BERYL'S CHOCOLATE FACTORY

On February 14th the MCG Explorers celebrated Valentine's Day by touring the Beryl's Chocolate Factory. The spirited MCG Explorers dressed in red and pink to celebrate the occasion. Beryl's is a Malaysian chocolate company that was established in 1995 and makes over 100 varieties of chocolate. Located near The Mines, it was a short and easy drive from KL.



At the factory we first watched a video explaining how chocolate is made. This was followed by a tour. The first display provided information on the history of chocolate and the cocoa bean, as well as the stages of chocolate production. We were then able to see the machines and workers in action. We were able to view five rooms of machinery showing us the various stages of chocolate production - starting from mixing and ending with wrapping. We were also able to watch the chocolate covered nuts and raisins tumble in big drums and the scanning and packaging of the chocolates.

The tour ended in the gift shop with an opportunity to taste and purchase chocolates. We then proceeded to The Mines Shopping Center where we enjoyed a Vietnamese lunch and good conversation. The only disappointment of the day was that the tour was short and not all of the machinery was functioning. The chocolate was happily carried home at the end of the day and MCG Explorers enjoyed a great Valentine's Day.

Dawn Keogh—text and photos



BOOK GROUPS

BOOK GROUP 1 - January**Shantaram by Gregory David Roberts**

I was first drawn to the book by its cover, compelled to read it by the review saying: "A novel of high adventure, great story telling and moral purpose, based on an extraordinary true story of eight years in the Bombay underground. "

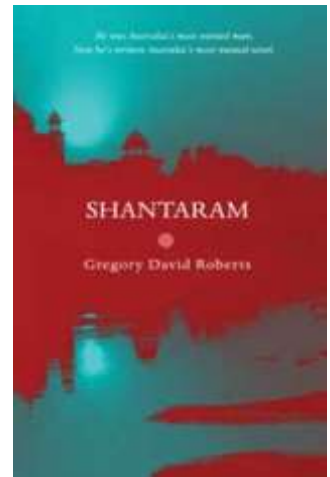
I believed it to be a true story; unbelievable, but true, and recommended it to many friends. However, when I discovered that it was not an autobiography, I was somewhat disappointed, as have been other readers, it turns out. As I delved into the author's background and his actual story as revealed on his website, he has taken his life's adventures and created a story around them, hence, Shantaram. The result is a very gripping story, exposing a society, two in fact, that are not a part of my way of life; life in the slums and life within the mafia.

I was taken aback by the compassion and community spirit of the slums. Without the support of the official government, this subculture exists with more camaraderie than most wealthy suburbs in the US. Not only taking care of the welfare of its residents, reacting against the tragedy of fire and disease, but also acting as the community's judicial system, as was the case with the alcoholic wife beater, who is reprimanded and rehabilitated. It impressed me as a large group who all work together for their common goal of survival.

On the flip side, the underground world of the mafia, seemed to be a society of extremely egotistical men, who could justify any criminal act, by "doing the wrong thing for the right reason", usually a financial gain. What I struggled with the most was, if freedom was so important to Lin the main character, why did he always fall back into a life of crime that ended up controlling and destroying him?

There are so many themes within this book; freedom, friendship, love, violence, fate, survival, that no matter who you discuss the book with, it affects everyone differently and can lead to the most provocative debates.

Cindy Turvill



BOOK GROUP 1—February

Songs of Blood and Sword, a Daughter’s Memoir by Fatima Bhutto

Sympathy and empathy was our group’s first reaction to Fatima Bhutto’s “Songs” which has moments that are profoundly shocking and moving. Response however, after the initial impact, gave way with alacrity to severe criticism.

Fatima Bhutto has given herself the most difficult writing challenge imaginable – to write about her executed grandfather, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who founded the Bhutto political dynasty and her father Mir Murtaza Bhutto, who was gunned down outside his home in Karachi.

Murtaza’s fourteen year old daughter heard those fatal gunshots and fourteen years later, Fatima’s “A Daughter’s Memoir” was published. The book attempts to piece together the family history, her father’s years in exile, and the mysterious death of her uncle in France along with questioning the involvement of her aunt Benazir Bhutto.

In Pakistan the response to the book was mainly one of anger from not only critics but family members, especially her aunt Sanam Bhutto who stated in a letter published in “Dawn” (Pakistan’s oldest English-language newspaper) that “Her book is an assault on my family, on reality, and above all, on the truth.” Ms Bhutto has refused to have interviews with Pakistani journalists, maybe because of concerns for security. But in London a prominently advertised public event was cancelled because Ms Bhutto did not want to be questioned by a Pakistani expert.

We all recognized the difficulty writing a non-partisan account about such a troubled and complicated family called Bhutto. “It’s about a graveyard that is just too full” said Fatima. But we were all dissatisfied with the result. Subtitled the book “Memoir” was a codicil that protected the author from criticism of her historic accuracy and her lack of a thorough analysis of her father’s past and the moral choices he made.

The telling of the family history is selective and one-sided; facts and quotes are only included that endorse Ms Bhutto’s scenario of events. The outcome? It left us readers feeling that we had been short-changed; the account was oversimplified without balance and objectivity. To give one example, for the controversial involvement of Murtaza in the 1981 Pakistan International Airlines hijacking, the author only interviewed two people, one of whom was her father’s close friend; no other sources were cited. So there was no grappling with inconvenient truths. Understandably the tone of the book is of anger and passion and the desire to write the legacy of Murtaza Bhutto. However it was often repetitious with narrative wasted relating interviews that added no value to comprehending

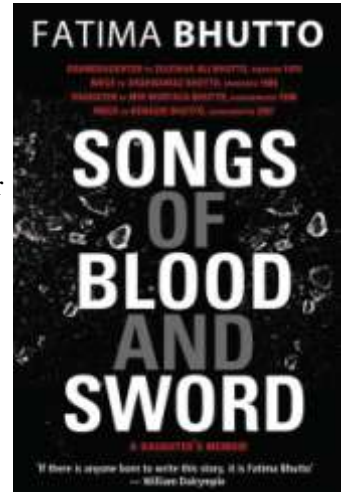


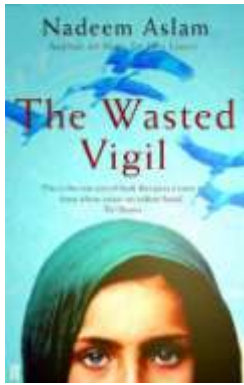
decisions and their outcome. The writing is at its most poignant when Fatima is writing personally, when she is writing her own thoughts especially concerning her father.

Inevitably we all speculated on the author’s objectives – was this a first step to launch a political career? Fatima has stated that she has no ambition to enter the political arena and that she does not believe in birthright politics.

“Songs of Blood and Sword” convinced us all that politics is in the DNA of a Bhutto – time will tell if Ms Bhutto will remain outside the political sphere.

Diana Cooper
Group photo by Britt Spyrou





BOOK GROUP 2 - February

The Wasted Vigil by Nadeem Aslam

Set in modern day Afghanistan, this heartbreaking book covers Afghanistan's recent bloody history from 'all sides', from the Russian invasion, to the influence of the US and the West, and the increasing effect of Islamic Fundamentalism. The book's strength is the human stories it manages to eloquently tell against such a brutal backdrop. By interweaving the stories of very different characters, the reader is shown, in harsh reality, the true human impact of war on this ravished country and its people: Marcus, an English expat whose wife has been murdered by the Taliban, is searching for his lost grandson. Lara is from St Petersburg and arrives at Marcus' house in search of her brother who was a soldier in the Soviet

Army. David is a former CIA agent; he is looking for answers and questions his past involvement and the decisions he made in Afghanistan. Casa is an Afghani recruited at an early age and completely indoctrinated into the Taliban. The story of their linked pasts is revealed in stages throughout the book and as threads are slowly pulled together their worlds collide with shattering consequences.

There was a lot of discussion about the book and the issues it raises. We spent some time discussing the violent repression of women under the Taliban regime. In the book a quote is given: "Casa and fundamentalists like him: they are children of the devil. They have no choice but to spread destruction in the world." David counters "He is the child of a human, which means he has a choice and can change". We had a lively debate discussing these differing points of view. All of our members found the book powerful and moving. We agreed the author's writing style had the ability to strike right into the reader's heart, poignantly 'personalising' war and showing its devastating effect on individual lives.

This is not an easy book to read and the words: heartbreaking, harrowing, devastating, brutal, and honest were used often in our discussions. However, the group were unanimous in recommending the book and felt that anyone who wants to understand better the true human impact of war should definitely read it.

Sue Millar

BOOK GROUP 3—February

The Piano Teacher by Janice Y K Lee

Book Club 3 met at the home of Sal Addington to discuss The Piano Teacher, the debut novel by Janice Y. K. Lee. In spite of most of us not being impressed with the book, we still had a lively discussion for a couple of hours.

The story is set in Hong Kong during and after the World War II and Japan's occupation of the island. In 1951 Claire, a newly wed English woman arrives in Hong Kong and gets herself a job teaching Locket, the daughter of a wealthy Chinese family. There she meets Will, the family's English chauffeur. Her affair opens her eyes to an exotic lifestyle and an island society obsessed with class and race.

In 1941 Will was having an affair with Trudy, a Eurasian woman, when the Japanese invaded. The choice of actions they took, necessary to survive, and their ramifications overflow into his relationship with Claire.

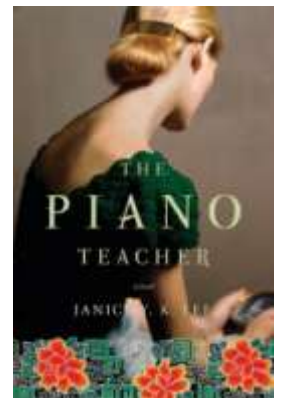
Whilst Claire is the piano teacher, she isn't by any means the main character in the book which was somewhat misleading. The author's use of differing tenses depending on whether it was the 1940's or 50's was noted and in retrospect worked well.

We were somewhat critical that Ms Lee didn't develop the relationships and characters enough with perhaps the exception of Will. The quick 'wrap up' of the ending left us frustrated as it was rather like tying up all the loose ends. We found many of the incidents described in the book unrealistic and that Ms Lee didn't catch the vibrancy of Hong Kong; perhaps this is due to Ms Lee herself who, despite having lived in Hong Kong as a child, describes herself as an outsider.

The author says she 'had no story at all' when she started the book – and didn't 'know where The Piano Teacher would end up' and that she just 'kept at it'. My personal feeling is that's exactly how the story line came across. Elle Magazine describes the book as 'This season's *Atonement*' – most of us feel that a comparison between McEwan's and Lee's writing cannot be made. Ms Lee is herself a former Elle editor and it was felt that some of the praise heaped on the book by such publications as Marie Claire, Vogue and O Magazine was due to her clever publisher rather than to the book's merits. However it did make the New York Times' bestseller list.

Would we recommend others to read The Piano Teacher? It's a good 'beach' read and compared to our last month's book choice, a pleasant and effortless read.

Aileen Olesen



ENAK!



Our well attended celebratory lunch. “Enak” - the flavor and essence of food was aptly met with our little foray into the little side streets of Bangsar. A trifle run down, just enough to render it quaint, Dorothee's newly christened "Ipoh Kitchen" has an authentic roadside coffee shop atmosphere hung with Chinese New Year red charms.

Part of the allure of this kind of eatery is the personality who owns or runs it. Dorothee is an interesting individual. Her journey has been varied in terms of her training. She started as a hostess with Singapore Airlines and went on after many turns and twists ten years later to learn and practice fashion design under her own label, for some of KL's big department stores; Parksons and C.K.Tang included. Then with the recession in the mid 1980s she could not sustain a situation where the department stores could not fulfill their commitments. She had to close her outlets and move on. She always loved cooking. As an Ipoh girl she decided to start a small coffee shop showcasing hawker

style home cooked Ipoh cuisine.

Dorothee never looked back. A great many people in Bangsar know her. The food is good, clean and flavorful. All her dishes come with those little extra condiments that enhance the flavor. In sewing terminology it is called 'gimping' or value added psychology. Her congee for example which is an all time favorite has it's own accouterments as does her chicken rice.

Recently she has gone down a more organic route. Her new kampong style organic chicken rice wrapped in Japanese sea weed dusted with sesame seeds is quite novel. The Ipoh noodles, tau foo fah, and the original dark Kaya are all part of her core offerings. Washed down with either hot fresh barley water or thickly brewed Ipoh style coffee.

For this Chinese New Year, Dorothee had added on crispy noodles Cantonese style, covered with seafood or shredded chicken. The hot favorite on my table was the prawn fritters. Crunchy and tart! Apparently they were rolled in crumbled salted egg and re-rolled in flour and then fried till they were crisp, dry and crunchy. Our feast began with the traditional 'Ee Sang', the celebratory raw fish salad. Yam baskets, sweet and sour fish fillet, peppered sotong, braised vegetables, bean curd skin sautéed with hot fresh silken bean curd cakes that melted in the mouth, followed by lemon chicken or mock lemon chicken for vegetarians, ending with thick crispy noodles, for long life, a la Hong Kong style (except at a quarter the price), overlaid with sea food, rounded off our meal.

Dorothee says in keeping with the new food trends she is becoming more health conscious and is using no flavoring additives. Health drinks are also available as a separate choice. So really this is eating to suit your taste, your health and your pocket; hence such a cross section of society eats with Dorothee.

Loubu Jumabhoy—text, Charlotte Sanders—pics





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MCG is run by volunteers. What would you like to do in 2011?

- Write a report about a meeting
- Assist with Events Planning
- Assist with membership
- Give a talk about _____
- Occasionally provide a venue for meetings
- Something else?

Do you have any expertise or experience to share with MCG?