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TEXT review

Snapshots of Life and Death

review by Ashley Brown



Barrie Sherwood

The Angel Tiger and Other Stories

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Barrie Sherwood has written two novels thus far: *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* (2000), and *Escape from Amsterdam* (2007). *The Angel Tiger and Other Stories* is, as the title suggests, a collection of short stories.

The stories are set, seemingly, in contemporary times (according to the occasional cultural reference such as Pokémon cards and *Top Gear*), in an assortment of Asian countries, such as Singapore, Japan and Sri Lanka. They involve a vast assortment of characters in a wide variety of environments, circumstances, emotional states and cultural conditions. Whereas this sounds like a great premise for an entertaining read, for this reviewer, the recurring

themes of death and loss – seven out of the thirteen stories involve death either by allusion or direct plot device – made this book, all in all, a difficult read.

Some of the best parts of the book are the snapshots of life, such as the story ‘Concert Hall’, in which Indian youth work in other countries to make enough cash to secure their futures back home:

At night these men sat out on the sidewalk, or in the harsh light of the Indian grocer next door, and talked to relatives on their mobile phones. On Saturday nights they drank big cans of Knock Out and half-pint bottles of Director’s Special. On Sundays they played cricket in the park. Once a month, they queued up on their day off to send money home by Western Union. (40)

Passages like these show the true, street-level life in other countries. Other excellent passages are from when Sherwood’s characters offer observations on things we take for granted, such as this description of a department store in the same story: ‘Abhas loved these megastores: labyrinths of plastic in an unearthly white light, not a shadow on anything’ (43). Sherwood’s main character in ‘Beneath the Palm’ gives excellent, detached observations, for example when she reflects on environments of joy in her past, such as making fortresses from cushions, and laments losing a sense of value in aesthetics:

A real house was serious business ... things that broke had to be fixed by professionals. Everything had to enhance the value, though nothing you did yourself really would ... the last place that had been any fun at all was her residence hall room at university, where the film noir posters and lava lamp and African masks all seemed to make a very important statement of aesthetics. No home décor would ever seem as important again – just the word “décor” was all wrong. (50-51)

Stories such as this one, and ‘Concert Hall’, both made this reviewer look up and digest the last lines – both stories end abruptly; not poetically, yet this is stylistically apt – everyday endings to stories about the everyday.

However, there are some aspects of the book that are less effective. For instance, there are occasional confusing analogies, such as in ‘Chairs’, where a character comments on a customised car: ‘An aesthetic devoid of the very function that first defined it. Like women with silicone breasts, eh?’ (72). Maybe that analogy is clear – maybe it’s just over this reviewer’s head.

One very curious part is the beginning of ‘The Cone Snail’, where the writer’s voice instantly changes into that of the characters:

...a Singaporean Sikh who lived with his aunt and owned a fleet of taxis that did a good business between the airport and the resort on the coast. A researcher had come to –

‘A what?’

‘A scientist,’ Lakhi Uncle explained... (86)

Being the eighth story in the book, a book which had so far made itself clear to be firmly in the realism genre, this was a jarring shift of literary voice.

Ultimately, however, the collection’s major weakness is that the stories are so short: so many of them deal with hefty subjects and themes (namely death and loss), for which readers need to have emotional investment in the characters, but because of the stories’ lengths, this is impossible. This, along with generally forgettable dialogue, has a few major consequences. For instance, I understand the messages of ‘Merissa Beach’ and ‘A Trip to the Beach’, but because they’re so short, they have no impact. There’s no room for an emotional build up; the characters have no room to breathe, develop or convince. This is pivotal for when characters do unexpected things. For instance, why did Ed spontaneously eat a turtle egg in ‘Merissa Beach’? There’s no explanation of the motivation to do so, and, in turn, the reader has no background information or emotions to base their reaction to either that, or indeed any character doing or saying anything unexpected (this happens quite a lot).

The book occasionally reminded me of Harry Harrison’s *West of Eden*, when two characters are talking, and in your mind’s eye, you envisage the characters delivering the dialogue with a particular manner of enunciation and emotion, but then, with a single word from the writer, the characters spontaneously change emotion. This happened conspicuously in ‘Bullet’ – the wife changes from dumbfounded but alert to suddenly crying, then, a short conversation later, from crying to strong, defiant and making controlled decisions. (‘Bullet’ is an intriguing story, but with a whopper of an anticlimax).

Finally, ‘Cougar’, and the book’s last tale, ‘Blushers and Panthers’, seem to be, well, pointless, as if they were merely extended thoughts.

All in all, *The Angel Tiger and Other Stories* is an acquired taste; a collection of emotional situations that you can only vicariously feel; a soup of characters doing and saying things for reasons that are often perplexing and never adequately explained. This reviewer feels that as Mr Sherwood’s literary career blooms into heading bestseller lists, *The Angel Tiger and Other Stories* will be regarded in the future as ‘for fans only’.

Ashley Brown is an Australian writer, editor, artist and teacher of English as an Additional Language (EAL), holding a Masters in TESOL. He taught academic and spoken English in universities in China from 2006 to 2015, in Wuhan and Nanjing. He has had articles, stories, and poetry published in, among many others, cordite.org, Newcastle Short Story Anthology, Catalyst, Farrago, Easey, Beat, Beijing Review and Nanjingexpat.com