

Sightseeing through the eyes of a Thai writer

Judith van Praag

Seattle was the sixth city in six days Rattawut Lapcharoensap ("Call me 'A'"), visited on his whirlwind US book tour promoting his short story collection "Sightseeing".

"It's all new to me, people knowing my work, readings, signings and interviews," "A" said. "And that while ten days ago I hadn't even seen my book on the shelves in bookstores in England."

Applying for grants and residencies is as much part of a writer's life as sending out manuscripts. And in answer to either, rejection slips may be expected. So, being granted the "David TK Wong Fellowship in Creative Writing" had come as a total surprise. After five months spent at the East Anglia campus in the UK, "A" still seemed puzzled that this good fortune had befallen him.

Born in Chicago in 1979 and raised both there and in Bangkok, moving back and forth with his family meant a constant learning and unlearning of languages for "A". Ultimately English became the language he studied and writes in.

At age fifteen he joined the Thai Arm Reserves, an alternative—available only to students who scored high on their GPA test—to being drafted after high school. His "miserable weekends" at "army camp" were the source for "Draft Day", a short story in the collection.

"Sure it's a commentary on corruption in society, but I also wanted to show the kind of 'ritualized drama' which everybody takes for granted without reacting on it."

In 1996 "A" left his home in Bangkok to finish his last year of high school in Ithaca, which would enable him to enter

Cornell University. A stranger in the small university town, missing his family, he started keeping a journal and diligently penned letters home (both in Thai).

Always a reader, "books were my constant companions," he chose Asian American literature as his major at Cornell. Intrigued "how stories were created," he took a creative writing course. His teacher encouraged him to continue on the writing track. Amazing that he did, considering the 35-40 hours per week he put in working various jobs, to earn his stay after the 1997 crash in the Far East. No wonder he didn't consider publication for a long time. He didn't think he was ready and saw his graduate studies as an apprenticeship period. Not without result, many of the stories in "Sightseeing" have appeared in *Granta*, *Zoetrope*: *All Story*, *One Story*, *Glimmer Train*, and *Best New American Voices*, and won him awards such as the Avery Jules Hopwood Award, and the Andrea Beauchamp Prize.

Although he gave a thought to nonfiction, "A" chose for fiction. At times his stories may read like well dramatized social commentaries, his characters and their names are fictitious, and so is the landscape in his stories. No use to look up the breadth of an island, or even it's name in the atlas, surroundings as well as characters are composites.

"I like writing fiction for the limitless possibilities it offers. I enjoy making things up, give my characters a range of emotions, pathos, and everything human."

And so he does. Not holding back, not painting the idyllic picture of a Thailand he didn't recognize in (mostly) travel literature. He gives individual faces to the working poor, the rich; showing the diversity within the Thai People, unafraid to show weaknesses alongside strengths.

In "Priscilla the Cambodian", "A" paints a not all together charming picture of the Thai community in which Cambodian

refugees land. But it is exactly that, the honesty of this writer, which makes "Sightseeing" a refreshing addition to the available literature about Thailand.

Having received his MFA in creative writing from the University of Michigan, the author still considers himself first a reader and only in the second place a writer. It's in reading that he discovered how, especially humor, gets lost in translation. And how literal translations of expressions in one language often are completely beside the point in another. So the writer in him takes great care to create the banter of his characters, the jokes they crack, the language they speak.

With the book's title story "Sightseeing" "A" satisfied his urge to write about a mother and son, in a relationship which wouldn't in the first place be one of complaint. The seed for the story idea was planted when confronted with the visual impairment of a friend of the family.

The son in "Sightseeing" mentions how a different way of seeing is triggered by impending doom. And in a way the impending blindness of the mother character can be seen as a metaphor for the decline of all of our elders.

Another story dealing with the same subject is "Don't Let Me Die in this Place," about an elderly American widower, who after suffering a stroke is forced to move in with his son's young family in Thailand. In this case the meaning of the title covers the sentiments at the beginning of the story. It is touching to read how the old curmudgeon connects with his grandchildren and how in the end it is he, who helps the young parents to let go of inhibitions. And you know the old man wants to live where he is, with his family in Thailand, rather than to die alone in the US.

After the author's reading at Elliot Bay Books, someone asked "A" whether there was a big difference between taking care of kin in Thailand and in the US.

"I can't speak for other people in Thailand," "A" said, "but I sure hope I'll take care of my mother."

The author doesn't project his personal ideas as The Universal Truth about Thailand and Thai People and this makes for a believable read, whether it's fiction or nonfiction.

"A" knows how to keep his readers interested, by showing compassion for his characters, with his overall subject material, and with his approach. His language is never dreary, dialogue believable, sentences are intermittently short, then long; delivering a variety of rhythm which keeps the reader alert. This young author's insight in human nature is convincing every inch of the way. Rattawut "A" Lapcharoensap may not want to be the ambassador of Thailand, he sure comes close.

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