

Not Just Another Migrant Story

Simone Lazaroo

This paper addresses some of the questions put to fiction writers when we were initially invited to discuss the marketing of Asian-Australian literature at the Asian Australian Identities Conference in June 2007. My responses, which follow here, are largely anecdotal and based on my observations and personal experience as a published fiction writer.

Q: What are the limitations of the term 'Asian-Australian' in marketing literature?

I realize that I've rarely, if at all, referred to myself during interviews or public discussions as an 'Asian-Australian' writer. Why? I wonder if it indicates insubstantial identification on my part with my locus of origin, the Eurasian community of Singapore. I migrated with my family to Australia in 1964 at the age of three and made only a few trips back in adulthood. In fact, I have at least two other reasons for not using the term 'Asian-Australian' in media interviews and the like. Firstly, though convenient, this term risks reducing so many very diverse cultures to one apparently homogenous grouping. (Despite this, I'm going to have my cake and eat it too—I'll use the term Asian-Australian in this article for convenience.)

My second reason for not using the term in publicity and press releases about my own work perhaps relates more directly to issues of marketing. Based on earlier experiences, I worry that categorizations such as Asian-Australian, Eurasian-Australian, Chinese-Australian or Italian-Australian, may lead to one's fiction being dismissed as just yet another example of 'ethnic minority' or 'migrant' writing by reviewers, publishers' marketing departments and readers. These kinds of categorisations often exclude considerations of other arguably more significant issues in one's fiction.

Tseen Khoo points out that reviewers placed Hsu-Ming Teo's Australian-Vogel award winning novel *Love and Vertigo* 'constantly in the categories of immigrant tales and confessionals' (158). This is despite the book's title and its obvious engagement with issues of gender and romantic love, which are just as important themes in the novel as immigrant issues such as racial identity, assimilation, and inequalities of power between mainstream and minority cultures in Australia. I found Khoo's observations interesting because I'd previously noted the tendency of several Australian newspapers' and journals' literary editors and critics to review two or three novels within the same review based on cultural associations, such as 'migrant' or 'ethnic minority' experience. In 2000, my

non-autobiographical novel *The Australian Fiancé* was reviewed in *The Weekend Australian* in the same article as a novel apparently based on the story of Italian migrants, under the subheading 'The migrant's tale is already a well-worn route—two new novels take the theme around the block once again' (Elliot 13). I couldn't help but wonder how my years of researching and writing about the effects of World War Two and the White Australia Policy upon women such as my novel's Singaporean Eurasian narrator had led to such an appraisal. Were my narrators' socio-historical circumstances and interpersonal struggles in each country so insignificant or poorly written? At least a few subsequent reviews suggested otherwise.

Why do so many Australian reviewers tend to categorise such novels in this way? Perhaps it's partly due to a reluctance to look beyond the most obvious details of setting, character and plot. Perhaps, too, some non-Asian-Australian reviewers have to engage more fully with some of the issues Asian-Australian writers address in their fiction. In a mostly fair-minded review of my most recently published novel *The Travel Writer* (2006), reviewer Kerryn Goldsworthy implied that my central women characters should have made better choices, and that she was longing to read a novel 'in which the heroine grows up secure in her happy childhood, does well at school, goes out into the world and kicks arse, falls reciprocally in love with a nice bloke and lives happily ever after' (Goldsworthy 11). I understand this reviewer's desire. Such a narrative would be satisfying, but far-removed from the reality of *The Travel Writer's* central characters. Perhaps Goldsworthy and I had observed very different subcultures and ways of being in the world. We certainly have very different views of the way historical circumstance and culture inflect gender and identity. I raise this example to illustrate that, sometimes, reviewers bring inappropriate criteria to bear on their judgements of literature outside their own cultural milieu. Although some reviewing in Australia is insightful and thorough, maybe this disjunction is indicative of a more widespread problem faced by other Asian-Australian writers. Tseen Khoo, for example, implies similar mismatches were present in some reviews of *Love and Vertigo* (158).

I also suspect that the ways in which publishers categorise a novel has considerable bearing on the way a book is perceived by writers of literary book reviews in newspapers and magazines, and by readers generally. It's easier for readers to recognise publishers' summaries of novels such as 'this is a story about resilience, a story about migration,' which appears at the very end of the back-cover of *Love and Vertigo*, than it is for them to interpret any longer extract from the book itself, which might suggest themes and categorisations with which they are less familiar.

Q: How is Asian-Australian literature currently marketed?

Many of the procedures used to market Australian literature generally apply. But it could be useful to reflect a bit here on the 'back-cover blurb,' an aspect of marketing that sometimes contributes to imprecise and stereotypical categorisations of Asian-Australian literature.

Firstly, the back-cover blurb is used in several stages of a book's marketing. It usually appears in the initial publicity material sent to media and booksellers, and in advertisements, and interviewers and reviewers often paraphrase it. Secondly, reading publishers' blurbs from the back covers of recent Asian-Australian fiction gives some insight into what publishers see as the selling points of particular books, and provides a point of comparison with the marketing of Asian-American writing, which we might possibly glean a few tips from, despite the obvious differences between Australian and American publishing climates and audiences. Finally, I suspect most Australian publishers would be amenable to utilising authors' input in their back-cover spiels.

In my experience, the back-cover blurb on the first edition of a book is often written by the publisher, sometimes in consultation with the author. In some cases, publishers include a positive review of an author's previous work or of a previous edition of the book. I've already indicated that Australian publishers' blurbs often tend to categorise Asian-Australian novels as stories about migration, even when the novels are arguably more concerned with issues such as assimilation and identity, emotional vulnerability and the exploitation by more powerful individuals of that vulnerability. The word 'exotic' appears on reviews and back covers of more than one contemporary Asian-Australian literary work, too, perhaps further emphasising a book's foreignness. My intention here isn't to criticise Australian publishers. Arguably, emphasising a book's foreignness or exoticness might be a deliberate marketing strategy. But I'd suggest that some Australian publishers have tended, perhaps inadvertently, to emphasise Asian-Australian novels' foreignness in their back-cover blurbs, to the exclusion of more topical or familiar issues that readers might engage or even identify with. Asian-Australian authors' access to both Western and Eastern experiences is potentially a source of great richness for their writing. Perhaps these authors' access to *both* the 'familiar' and the 'foreign' is a strength that might be better tapped by publishers' marketing departments, too; though I confess I need an expert marketer to show me how.

Q: Can we learn anything useful about the marketing of Asian-Australian literature from the marketing of Asian-American literature?

It's difficult to make direct comparisons between the marketing of Asian-American and Asian-Australian literature because demographic, economic

and cultural factors differ so widely between each country—for example, the percentage population of Chinese-Americans alone is considerably greater than Chinese-Australians. I believe there are many complete university courses in Asian-American studies in the United States, whereas only very few Australian universities offer a full course in Asian-Australian Studies. But I think we can at least learn a point or two from the marketing of Asian-American literary works that we might consider applying to the marketing of Asian-Australian literature. Examples I've seen of Asian-American novels give a short summary of setting and plot before a brief concluding statement of central themes and issues, as is the case for many novels in Australia. But it seems to me that in the recent past, American publishers have often identified different kinds of themes and issues on their back covers, and they often relate these to broader and, arguably, more topical issues. Let's consider just those concluding brief sentences about central themes or issues from the back cover of just a few Asian-American novels. Bear in mind that all concluding statements I'll quote from here come after a brief synopsis of the books' plot and setting, which I won't include here, due to their length. The back cover of Kiran Desai's Booker award-winning novel, published in 2006, states *The Inheritance of Loss* 'is a story of joy and despair. Her characters face numerous choices that majestically illuminate the consequences of colonialism as it collides with the modern world.'

Or consider the back of Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005)

Filled with Amy Tan's signature idiosyncratic, sympathetic characters, haunting images, historical complexity, significant contemporary themes ...

And here's the back-cover blurb for Tan's much earlier and ostensibly more biographical novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*:

Her vivid characterisation, her sly and poignant humour, and her sympathetic insights into human relationships—give us a compelling novel, both painful and sweet, suffused with hopes universal to us all.

These quotations demonstrate what interests me about their publishers' back-cover blurbs: that is, relating a book's geographically and culturally specific details of plot and setting to more global or universal issues and themes. Assessing the ideological implications of these American publishers' blurbs is beyond the scope of this article. It's enough to say that some of them sound at least a little contrived, if not downright cheesy, and might be accused of erroneously attempting to universalise culturally specific experience. But, rightly or wrongly, the back-cover blurbs of the American examples I've quoted from do seem to encourage 'non-Asian-American' readers to find these Asian-American authors' fiction somehow relevant to either their own experience, or to broader human experience generally.

But perhaps it might be said that writers such as Amy Tan and Kiran Desai are more discernibly concerned than many Asian-Australian writers with relating their Asian characters' experiences to broader human experience. Quite possibly there are clues here for aspiring Asian-Australian writers, that's if American publishers' and literary readers' tastes are anything like their Australian counterparts. Regardless, these Asian-American publishers' blurbs suggest an interest in fiction that is both concerned with detail about distinctive regional social and physical settings and historical circumstances, yet also relates to broader human experience or more global issues. Don't get me wrong: I don't intend here to be prescriptive about what we should and should not write about, or to dismiss the possibility of other thematic concerns.

Q: What other lessons might we in Australia learn from the marketing of Asian-American or Asian-British fiction?

Despite the differences between the American, British and Australian scenes, it could be instructive to note some of the strategies American and British publishers use to appeal to groups of readers such as book clubs and classes. While Asian-American works of fiction are more regularly set as secondary school and university texts in the US, and book clubs in the US are bigger business than they are here, there are strategies that might be applied to Asian-Australian fiction in order to appeal to collective audiences such as book-clubs without blowing Australian publishers' smaller marketing budgets. For example: included at the back of some recent Asian-American and Asian-British novels are reading guides, in the form of questions, that direct readers to significant aspects of the novel (for example in *The Inheritance of Loss*, which bears the message 'Reading Group Guide inside' on the back cover). While this will doubtless make some purists wince, such reading guides suggest to buyers that a book is eminently suited to reading by larger groups of people. These two- or three-page guides tell potential readers about more of the book's concerns than the limited space on the back cover can possibly do.

According to publicists of Australian publishing companies I spoke to in 2006, Australian readers are also interested in knowing the inspirations and processes followed by authors as they wrote their book. A relatively inexpensive way of doing this is the inclusion of a brief interview with the author at the back of the book, such as the one in the Malaysian-British writer Tash Aw's first novel *The Harmony Silk Factory*. Such guides can help readers of literature set in Asian contexts to make connections between the familiar and the foreign.

Q: How can we 'write Asian-Australianness into being', or describe an Asian-Australian identity in our literary writings?

I don't wish to underestimate the importance of such aims, but I suspect that the quality of fiction often suffers if one writes with too narrow a prescribed agenda in mind, and that attempting to 'write' Asian-Australianness, or describing an Asian-Australian identity, might not on their own be the most productive triggers for writing really engaging fiction. I believe good fiction writing is often triggered by a combination of several concerns important to the author, and some of them might arguably be broader or narrower than how to write Asian-Australianness into being. For example, concerns about what it is to be human and how people operate in the world; or about injustice; or memorialising particular places, cultures, eras and individuals; or crafting a story to give readers pleasure or anxiety or entertainment. Of course, such aims are not incompatible with describing Asian-Australian identities into being. For many emerging writers, so-called 'broader' concerns are often conveyed in narratives that are developed utilising the details of one's culture of origin. And for the literary offspring of various diasporas, an imaginative investment in the familial past they've known about only through parental anecdotes may be a fruitful and necessary step in their development as writers.

What I'm suggesting is that the project of writing Asian-Australianness into being, or describing an Asian-Australian identity, might be an incidental rather than pre-meditated outcome of writing the most interesting story that an individual writer can tell at a particular time. That doesn't mean both general and academic readers can't interpret our writing as describing an Asian-Australian identity. After all, one of the roles of the reader and critic is to interpret.

Q: Should Asian-Australians feel compelled to write about their identity?

Though writing about identity has been a necessary stage in my development as a writer, I certainly don't think Asian-Australian authors should feel compelled to write about their 'identity'.

I do agree, however, with the view that the story of individuals' struggles for identity as they negotiate different cultures is arguably one of *the* stories of our times. But anyone who's read, say, Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* will recognise it as being one of the most finely written renditions of certain kinds of Anglo-Saxon British character, with not an Asian-British character in sight. Such books suggest to me that Asian writers of the diaspora can be well-placed to write about their adopted culture, or cultures elsewhere in the world. So long as writers from any culture are prepared to research and observe their subject thoroughly, shouldn't they be entitled to write about anything they choose?

Q: Is the autobiographical impulse still present (and a curse?) for Asian-Australian authors?

Writing about autobiographical issues is a reasonably common and sometimes publishable starting point for many fiction writers, regardless of their cultural origins. Obviously this is at least partly because autobiographical experience provides one of the most accessible sources of the kinds of details we need to write creatively. Is this autobiographical impulse a curse? Yes and no. At least two Australian publishers have told me that there continues to be strong reader interest for work perceived as autobiography or memoir, and their publicists have been keen to know if there are any autobiographical links in all three of my novels. In America, Maxine Hong Kingston's prize-winning book *The Woman Warrior* (1977) was written initially as fiction, but marketed by her publishers with the subheading *Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, because they perceived memoir and autobiography sold better than fiction. I understand this perception continues to exist amongst many American and Australian publishers. But several Chinese-American academics, including Frank Chin, Jeffrey Chan and Benjamin Tong, have accused writers such as Kingston and Amy Tan of both Americanising and Orientalising Chinese family stories, by publishing them for the American market (Shu 200). It's possible some Asian-Australian writers face similar dilemmas. I've engaged in my writing with related issues of commodifying Asian culture. Dorothy Wang pointed out that my first novel *The World Waiting to be Made* shows 'how "Australianness", and "Asianness" and individuality are commodities to be bought and sold' (44-9). In my forthcoming novel *Unexpected Guests*, the central character, a Eurasian cook in a Balinese hotel catering for Western tourists, tells a lifestyle magazine writer 'You think Asian culture is a line you can make a quick buck from'.

Q: How open is the field to new and emerging Asian-Australian writers?

Many of you will have read newspaper articles in the literary pages on the difficulty both new and many established writers are currently having getting published in Australia. A quick scan of the web sites of many of the reputable Australian literary agents shows that they are 'not currently taking on new clients'. When an emerging writer I know asked one agent why, the agent replied that it's largely due to the current difficulty in finding publishers for unsolicited manuscripts. Literary agents, it seems, are reluctant to spend time trying to find publishers for little-known writers in the current publishing climate.

English and Australian literary agents and publishers I've spoken to say the publishing industry is in recession worldwide, and that nowadays, in England and Australia at least, decisions as to which literary fiction manuscripts will be published rarely rest with the literary editors of publishing houses, as they often did five or more years ago. A London-based literary agent told me recently that

in England, at least, the accountants of publishing companies usually make such decisions these days, often based on their judgement of whether a book will be saleable on supermarket bookstands. So I suspect that new and emerging Asian-Australian writers seeking publication can expect as tough a time as anyone else, if not tougher, partly for the reasons I've already mentioned above.

However, I don't wish to discourage new or established writers. Many of us are aware of the relative scarcity of published literature about the whole range of cultures categorised as Asian, and of the misinformation about these cultures in Australia. We need more fiction of various genres not only to dispel this misinformation, but to appeal to readers on other levels, too. And there are glimmers of hope. I understand that an English publishing company is working on publishing a list of fiction and non-fiction books about Asian subjects. It will be interesting to see if this works as a marketing strategy. If so, perhaps we'll see literature by Asian-Australians travelling overseas.

Q: So what advice might be given to unpublished, emerging literary fiction writers of Asian-Australian literature hoping to write for publication by mainstream publishing houses here and in England and America?

If we consider several of the most successful recent novels about Asia generally, they more often than not explore the interface between Asia and the West, often through interactions between Western and Asian characters. This is hardly surprising; more than one critic has suggested that the story of individuals living between cultures is one of the most significant stories of our times. It could be argued that fiction about being Asian-Australian is by definition about such individuals. Good quality writing such as Hsu-Ming Teo's *Love and Vertigo* and Alice Pung's *Unpolished Gem* found a publisher and prizes. But for British and American publishers, it seems that literary fiction about Asian or Asian-Australian experience might have a better chance of being published if it's perceived as being more global in its appeal. Here, a comment from an English agent regarding my latest manuscript *Unexpected Guests* is perhaps illustrative: 'If this were just a little novel about an Asian-Australian living in Bali, our chances of selling it over here would be low. But I think this novel is making important comments about Western tourism in third world countries, and has a good chance of selling.' It's too early for me to say if this English agent's judgement is correct, but her comment is at least slightly indicative of an interest in 'other' cultures and places within the context of currently topical issues.

Q: Any concluding comments on what might improve the marketing of Asian-Australian literature?

Perhaps it goes without saying that not only do we need more publishers with reasonable marketing budgets and cultural sensitivity to give Asian-Australian literary writers of merit a go, but we also need more critics knowledgeable of the great diversity of Asian-Australian cultures to review those writers' work in 'mainstream' newspapers and magazines, not just academic journals and books. One can only hope that Asian-Australian literature will be reviewed more often in more informed ways in such newspapers and magazines, rather than according to culturally inappropriate criteria.

Simone Lazaroo won the Western Australian Premier's Award for Fiction for all three of her novels, which have also been short-listed for national and international literary awards. The World Waiting to be Made has been translated into French and Mandarin, The Australian Fiancé is optioned for film, and extracts from the manuscript of The Travel Writer won awards including the David T.K. Wong Fellowship at the University of East Anglia, England. Simone's short stories have been anthologised in Australia and England. She was a judge of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Pacific /South East Asian region) in 2006, and lectures at Murdoch University, Perth.

Works Cited

- Aw, Tash. *The Harmony Silk Factory*. London: Fourth Estate, 2005.
- Desai, Kieran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New York: Grove Atlantic, 2006.
- Elliot, Helen. 'Pick an era, pick an angle'. *The Weekend Australian Review*, August 19-20, 2000:13.
- Goldsworthy, Kerryn. 'Travels among colonised women'. *The Australian Literary Review* 1.2 (October 2006):11.
- Hong Kingston, Maxine. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. London: Picador, 1977.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989.
- Khoo, Tseen-Ling. *Banana Bending: Asian-Australian and Asian-Canadian Literatures*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2003.
- Lazaroo, Simone. *The World Waiting to be Made*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000.
- . *The Australian Fiancé*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2000.
- . *The Travel Writer*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2006.

- Pung, Alice. *Unpolished Gem*. Melbourne: Black Inc, 2007.
- Shu, Yuan. 'Cultural Policies and Chinese-American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingston's *Woman Warrior*.' *Melus* 26.2 (2001): 199-223.
- Tan, Amy. *The Kitchen God's Wife*. New York: Flamingo, 1991.
- . *Saving Fish from Drowning*. London: Fourth Estate, 2005.
- Teo, Hsu-Ming. *Love and Vertigo*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2000.
- Wang, Dorothy. 'The Making of an "Australian" Self in Simone Lazaroo's *The World Waiting to be Made*.' *Diaspora: Negotiating Asian Australia*. Ed. Helen Gilbert, Tseen Khoo and Jacqueline Lo. St Lucia: Queensland UP, 2000. 44-9.