

For Fiction Only

This collection gathers three of Philip Jeyaretnam's best-known works in a single volume. Together, they showcase his mastery of the written word across a range of forms, subject matter and emotional landscapes.

The short stories and novels set in Singapore explore themes of identity, materialism, interracial relationships, power and betrayal while exposing the nation's frailties, cracks and contradictions. Jeyaretnam's characters—the thinkers, dreamers and doers—make their own way, searching for meaning in the gaps between achievement, aspiration and regret.

FIRST LOVES displays Jeyaretnam's intimate understanding of young love and loss, while **RAFFLES PLACE RAGTIME** examines the place of love in relation to ambition, deception and material aspiration. In **ABRAHAM'S PROMISE**, an old man comes to an understanding and reconciliation of his life and times hard-won in maturity.

Charged with emotional power and clarity, Jeyaretnam's spare, thoughtful prose shows off his gift for characterisation and confirms him as an elegant, eloquent stylist.

"[Philip Jeyaretnam] works from an understanding of the language, a marvellous feel for words and clever eye for the idiosyncratic detail that marks and grows characters."

— *Business Times*

visit our website at:
www.marshallcavendish.com/genref

mc Marshall Cavendish
Editions



THE PHILIP JEYARETNAM
COLLECTION

Marshall Cavendish
Editions

mc

THE
PHILIP
JEYARETNAM
COLLECTION

FIRST LOVES | **RAFFLES PLACE RAGTIME** | **ABRAHAM'S PROMISE**

Includes a preface for a new generation of readers



For Review Only

“[*First Loves* is] distinguished first by a very fine command of detail and carefully crafted structure; and secondly, by the most sensitive and delicate handling of sexual and adolescent matters ever seen in Singapore fiction.”

– *Far Eastern Economic Review*

“[Philip Jeyaretnam] works from an understanding of the language, a marvellous feel for words and clever eye for the idiosyncratic detail that marks and grows characters.”

– *Business Times*

“[Philip Jeyaretnam’s] concern at Singapore’s lack of a distinctive, coherent, local cultural and spiritual tradition emerges clearly throughout [*Raffles Place Ragtime*] ... Singaporean society is grounded on contradictions, especially between silent past and obsessive present, and between individual fulfilment and material success. In the interests of sanity, he [Philip] indicates it may well be necessary to give priority to the former over the latter. *Raffles Place Ragtime* was again short listed for the Commonwealth Writers Prize.”

– Peter Wicks, in *Tigers in Paradise*

“[*Abraham’s Promise* is] a novel of regret for actions not taken and words unspoken, eloquent in the spareness of its prose and the gradual unveiling of the narrator’s self-deception.”

– *The New York Times*

For Review Only

“...that rare thing in today's and a unique thing in Singaporean fiction, [*Abraham's Promise* is] a successful novel about a good man. It is a beautifully crafted work, as celebration of as well as a lament for Singapore's past, its calm measured sentences mirroring its narrator's educated mind.”

— *The New Straits Times*

“Character gives his fiction location and tone ... *Abraham's Promise* is charged with emotional and subjective power.”

— *World Literature Today*

“[*Abraham's Promise*] is a compelling, thoughtful and timely novel that raises many issues relevant not only to contemporary Singaporeans, but to a much wider global audience. It will prove useful material for examining how all of us carry the baggage of our past into our decisions about the future; how we cope with the gaps between our ideals, the current state of society, and the awful burden of trying to shape the latter more to the former's image...”

— *Culture*

For Review Only

THE
PHILIP
JEWARETHAM
COLLECTION

For Vivian, who gave me love and meaning

© 2017 Philip Jeyaretnam

First Loves first published in 1987 by Times Books International and in 2009 by Marshall Cavendish Editions; *Raffles Place Ragtime* first published in 1988 by Times Editions and in 2010 by Marshall Cavendish Editions; *Abraham's Promise* first published in 1995 by Times Editions and in 2010 by Marshall Cavendish Editions. The works in this collection were also published in 2004 by Times Editions as part of *Tigers in Paradise: The Collected Works of Philip Jeyaretnam*.

This edition published 2017 by Marshall Cavendish Editions
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International
1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196



All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Request for permission should be addressed to the Publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. Tel: (65) 6213 9300
E-mail: genref@sg.marshallcavendish.com

The publisher makes no representation or warranties with respect to the contents of this book, and specifically disclaims any implied warranties or merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose, and shall in no event be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damage, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices:

Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA
• Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd, 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Marshall Cavendish is a registered trademark of Times Publishing Limited

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Name(s): Jeyaretnam, Philip. | Marshall Cavendish Editions, publisher.
Title: The Philip Jeyaretnam collection.

Description: Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2017.

Identifier(s): OCN 968234932 | ISBN 978-981-47-7908-1 (paperback)

Subject(s): LCSH: Singaporean fiction (English) | Short stories, Singaporean (English)

Classification: DDC 5823--dc23

Printed in Singapore by Fabulous Printers Pte Ltd

Contents

Preface 7

FIRST LOVES

Part One: **Ah Leong**

Beginning 13 Father 20 Sister 28 Mother 35 A New Eye 44

Brother 55 Friends 63 Parties 69 Another Eye 77

Middle 85 Work 90 Love Projects 101 Going Out 107

The Third Eye 117 Traps 125 Army 141 Fighting 146

The Final Eye 150 End 159 Painting the Eye 165

Painting His Heart 174 Painting The Tiger 183

(Author's note: The stories in this section should be read in sequence.)

Part Two: **Short Stories**

Campfire 191 Evening Under Frangipani 198

RAFFLES PLACE RAGTIME 233

ABRAHAM'S PROMISE 363

Bibliography and Awards 522

About the Author 524

I am beginning to be able to say those words

calmly. At **FIRST** the thought

of new lovers, lying in her arms where I ought to be,

fired darts of pain through me. But now the poetry is telling me

this is the way of all **LOVES**. I am not

numbered or disabled by that message as I was

when Nina first told me she was leaving.

Beginning

Evening brought the breeze, channelled by the concrete blocks, blowing across Singapore. Evening set the birds chattering, as if desperate for one last word before darkness silenced them. Evening brought light, flooding the corridors of the concrete blocks and lining the roads. The daytime of tinted windows and air-conditioning was giving way to the night-time of fluorescent tubes and halogen headlights. White then red flashed the cars speeding past on the road outside Ah Leong's window.

Across the country televisions were coming on and video cassette recorders plugged in. Husbands greeted wives and changed channels. Children greeted mothers and clamoured for dinner. Ah Leong stood at the window and looked out, trying to fix all Singapore in his gaze. He could not actually see much. Below a road, running parallel to his block, open monsoon drains on either side, lit by street lamps and the passing cars. Trees blocked the pavements at intervals, trees that for all their efforts at growth looked two-dimensional from the tenth floor. Opposite was another concrete block, the open corridors facing him. If he stretched and craned his neck he could see beyond that block others receding to left and right. And if he followed the road's course through that gorge he came in either direction to an intersection, governed by traffic lights, and dominated by new clusters of concrete blocks.

Ah Leong could not see much but nonetheless he felt the breeze on his face and wondered by what stealth it had infiltrated the maze,

stealing down ravines and scaling cliffs. And nonetheless he felt it possible to see further than the next block, as if he had X-ray vision. He felt his gaze searching across the land from where he stood, reaching into all the flats at his level, the tenth floor. He felt a special affinity for all those who dwelt on the tenth floor. They ought to form a community, bound together by their horizontal ties. He wondered about the blocks on higher ground. Should their tenth floors form part of his community? Should his community be one of height relative to the ground? Or height relative to sea level? If it was height relative to sea level then other floors in some blocks would gain access to his community. But there could not be many such blocks. Singapore had been flattened for land reclamation, the hills dumped in the sea. Perhaps this flattening had helped create horizontal communities, perhaps the rubbing out of individual neighbourhoods by bulldozers and concrete mixers brought closer the higher ideal of national unity, unity born of sharing the same level of airspace?

But how could this be so when no one else recognised this shared experience? He had strolled along the common corridors of other tenth floors and no one had ever stopped him, welcomed him to their branch of the community. Nor did other floors seem any different. Everywhere one walked one heard the same noises: babies, onions frying in oil, quarrelling—the hubbub from which escape was sought in television or video, escape routes that only added to the babble.

No, he was dreaming again. Standing by the window when he should be sitting at his desk doing his mathematics homework. Father would be back soon and Ah Leong would go into the front room to be with him. Ah Beng, his younger brother, would come in and switch on the cartoons. In fact he had come back already, from catching spiders or climbing trees: Ah Leong could hear the TV. Mother was already preparing the evening meal, probably fretting because his sister Mei Li was still out.

For Review Only

Dreaming again. Was his dreaming not as much an escape as watching television, exactly what he rejected for the way it put one's vision in a straitjacket and fed one bland images to soothe one's fears and prepare one for sleep at the end of the day? No, dreaming was an escape, an escape from homework, but it was an escape that involved vaulting over wire fences, outrunning hungry Alsatians and evading the searchlights of the guards. Escaping honed his imagination, developed his thoughts so that he could laugh at the guards shouting 'Homework, homework or you'll spend your life in a dustbin.'

Ah Leong put his homework away. He would get up early tomorrow. There was always the bus journey. And usually someone who would help with the finer points of trigonometry.

The door flew open, the handle gashing the side of a cupboard. Ah Beng strode in, firing from the hip. *Rat-a-tat-tat.*

'Can't I get any peace?'

'Guess what I've been doing.'

'What?'

'Guess.'

'Killing people?'

'No. I do that every day.'

'You pulled some girl's hair?'

'No. Something special. The greatest.'

'I give up.'

'You know Ronnie?'

'The one who bathes once a year?'

'Yes. Terrible dandruff. Real gone case.'

'So?'

'So today was the worst ever. So listen!'

'Got choice?'

'No. We go looking for ants. And when we find a trail Ronnie shakes his head over them. So the ants think this is manna from

heaven, the Second Coming. They're running all over the place picking up those juicy white flakes and then getting back into formation, waving these flakes over their heads. Like this.'

Ah Beng had climbed onto his bed and holding a sheet of paper above his head swayed from side to side.

'You're sick.'

Beng jumped off the bed.

'And then, and then, one of us gets his charger out and whoosh, flood the trail. Scatter the ants. All frantic. Lost the goodies. And now under attack.'

'You're an animal, Beng.'

'You should have seen how surprised they were.'

'Surprised? Probably terrified.'

'We did that four times. Four of us—four trails.'

'I suppose you taught the ants that nothing comes free.'

'Nothing comes free. Fun or not?'

Ah Leong could not help laughing at Ah Beng's mock wicked expression, his lips curled, snarling like a cat.

'Piss off.'

'Not here!'

When they stopped laughing, they heard father in the front room and went through to see him. He was asking mother where Mei Li was. Mother snorted. How, she asked, was she supposed to know? It was the father's job to keep the girl in check. If he never laid down any rules how could she enforce them? Father kept quiet. He went to the toilet and washed his face, working the soap into a thick lather.

Mei Li walked in. She hugged her mother, smothering her protests. She went through to the back and waited for father to wash the soap off his face and pat it dry. Then she kissed him.

They sat down to the evening meal. Mounds of rice. Beef fried with green pepper in black bean sauce. *Kai lan* scorched and

For Review Only

covered in oyster sauce. Eat, mother said, gesturing expansively.

They ate. When they had finished, father pushed back his chair, the legs scraping on the tiles. He paused dramatically, looking from one face to another.

'Guess what I've brought.'

'Longans?'

'No, better.'

'Chocolate?'

'No, still better.'

'Give up.'

'Everyone give up?'

'Give up.'

'Give up.'

Father stood up and walked over to the fridge. He swung open the door, reached in and drew out two golden mangoes.

'Mangoes!'

'Not just any mangoes. Not mangoes from a shop. From a tree.'

'A tree?'

'A mango tree?'

Father took a knife from a drawer and found the sharpening stone. He drew the knife across the stone, once, twice. He put the mangoes on a plate. He cut each mango into three parts, cutting as close as possible to either side of the stone. Then he scored the flesh of each of the outer parts, lengthways and across, and with a deft flick of his thumbs inverted them, so that the skin formed the concave surface and the flesh separated into distinct cubes.

Within moments of father's setting down the plate on the table, the skin lay forlorn and abandoned. Ah Beng and Ah Leong were busy chewing on the stones.

Mei Li asked father about the tree.

'I consider it my tree. A magnificent tree. At the back of the factory on waste ground. There used to be *attap* houses there, two

or three—who knows? The owners were removed, resettled, the houses have fallen down. All around are factories. But the tree, the tree has remained.'

'Don't others know about it?'

'Sure. But I'm in charge of security. I check people entering the gate. I check the fencing. And I check the mango tree. I have to share a little with the other guards. Or with the workers. But I have staked out my rights over that tree. They see me sit there in my spare time. Who would dare take a mango without asking me? Not even the biggest boss.'

'And if he asked?'

'I'd give. I'm not selfish.'

'Thank you father for the mango.'

Mei Li reached over and kissed him gently on the cheek.

That night Ah Leong made the trip from bed to toilet several times. Ah Beng seemed untroubled, breathing slowly and softly as he always did in the bunk above Ah Leong. But Ah Leong felt his stomach and bowels dissolve. Too much mango perhaps. Or not quite ripe. Or perhaps his stomach was unused to real fruit, to fruit that had not been picked over by shopkeepers and housewives. He lay in his bed, concentrating so strongly on mastering his stomach that sleep did not come.

He thought of the two bedrooms above him, of the eight below him. Were others in that chain awake? Was there a vertical affinity so that all above or below him would be wakened by his restlessness? Or was there no more a vertical community than a horizontal one? Was he alone with the tremors in his stomach, the insecurity in his bowels? Was there no one to keep him company? And if he could not sleep, he would not rise early. His homework would be left undone, not for the first time. Alone in his bed he stared at the ceiling, as if trying to penetrate the bedrooms above. There must be more than just a schedule of homework, a schedule

For Review Only

he for one could never keep pace with.

He turned over, pressing his face into the pillow. Better to retreat into oneself if there was no one else. But a moment later he turned back over. The toilet beckoned. That was a reality he could not ignore.



About the Author

Philip Jeyaretnam has practised law for nearly thirty years. He still writes occasional short stories and remains engaged in the writing and arts communities.