

## REFERENCE

Hell, Stefan. *Siam and the League of Nations: Modernisation, Sovereignty and Multilateral Diplomacy, 1920–1940*. Bangkok: River Books, 2010.

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*White Métisse*. By Jack Yeager. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2018. xx+270 pp.

Published thirty years ago, Kim Lefèvre’s *White Métisse* traces the final decades of colonial rule in Indochina through the experience of one girl caught between two peoples at war and the two poles of her being, French and Vietnamese. Born to a French father who abandons her and a Vietnamese mother for whom she is the embodiment of a shameful transgression, the narrator’s formative years are marked by ambivalence and subject to an existential volatility heralded in the first chapter’s title: “Wandering”. The narrator’s family, who “always lived on the lookout” (p. 58), relocate regularly—fleeing poverty, the judgment of those around them, and the fury of war. Early in the novel, when the Viet Minh enter her village to enlist support against the French, her mother hides her in an earthenware jar; her French blood is a betrayal of the nation and a reminder of its subjugation. The young narrator, left alone in the dark, understands suddenly that she is the enemy of her countrymen, the only people she has truly known, the people whose grief she will later share when their homes are destroyed to save them from being captured by the French.

The image of unwitting enemies shrouded in darkness is a powerful one, and one through which we might better understand the internal and external conflict that punctuates *White Métisse*. Indeed, the novel not only offers an account of these decades of turmoil, detailing the devastating effects of war on both North and South; it exposes the violent hypocrisies of traditional Vietnamese society, giving voice to those who, because of their mixed race, have been

forsaken by the nation and largely left out of its historical record. Jack Yeager's timely translation of Lefèvre's autobiographical novel follows Christina Firpo's history of this forgotten population of *métis* children in colonial and postcolonial Vietnam (Firpo 2016), bringing to the Anglophone reader the author's vivid memories of life as a *métisse* in French Indochina—the triple handicap of being a woman, biracial, and illegitimate; the sexual allure of 'white métissage' for Vietnamese men; the 'protection' provided by French orphanages, where many *métis* children forcibly removed from their families were assimilated to French culture. Alongside books like Kien Nguyen's *The Unwanted* (2008), the memoir of a young boy born to an American father and a Vietnamese mother, Lefèvre's account exposes the institutional and interpersonal hostility that shaped generations of young children in Vietnam. Nguyen was a young boy when Saigon fell to the Communists in 1975, and his narrative portrays the violent resentment displayed towards the mothers of Amerasian children, who were forever marked as collaborators with the vile American enemy, and consequently the extreme precarity these children experienced in the decades following the war.

The rhythm, imagery and crisp clarity of Lefèvre's prose give the narrative an almost buoyant quality that is skilfully matched in Yeager's rendering, which also balances the sombre uncertainty of the narrator's trauma with an unexpected but welcome lightness of expression. In a moment of reflection on the tender words that her mother would only share with her in letters written late in life, after the two had separated, the narrator compares such maternal affection to the phantom sounds of the ocean: "like a shell you hold up to your ear, like a missed moment of happiness" (p. 45). Yeager's gentle "missed moment" evokes the consonance in the original French—"comme l'écho d'un bonheur manqué" (p. 78)—but softens the harshness of the consonant *c* into the liquidity of the nasal, all the while maintaining through the repetition of the *m* the "unbearable suffering" that marked their relationship (p. 45).

Yeager's introduction to the translation offers more insight into the novel's themes and historical context than it does his own process, highlighting the signal importance of sexuality in the narrative, for example, and illuminating questions of race and political allegiance in colonial Vietnam. He also inserts occasional footnotes to further explain aspects of Vietnamese history, culture and language. Finally, in a brief note on the translation, he explains his decision to retain the word *métisse* in the title and throughout the novel, noting not only the connotations attached to English equivalents (*mulatto*, for example), but also, and perhaps more importantly, insisting on the evocative imagery of the "cloth woven (*tissé*) from two threads" that would be lost in translation (p. vii). In his title, in English and French, Yeager's *White Métisse* maintains from the very start the intricate tapestry woven in Lefèvre's remarkable memoir.

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*Mahathir's Islam: Mahathir Mohamad on Religion and Modernity in Malaysia*. By Sven Schottmann. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. xii+243 pp.

On 10 May 2018, Mahathir Mohamad was sworn in as Malaysia's seventh prime minister, his second stint as the country's top leader. Mahathir was prime minister between 1981 and 2003 but came back from retirement. Observers are divided in their assessment