

*The Songs of Salanda and Other Stories of Sulu.* By H. Arlo Nimmo. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994. Pp. 237.

It is true that anthropologists are raconteurs, story tellers whose observant eye lends a credence to tales about the subjects of their researches, places and peoples exotically distanced from home — wherever that may be. And there are those reported acts of bravado and chagrin embroidered to turn the droll eye of the narrator on himself or herself. After all, the anthropologist is an adventurer travelling into another society. While so doing, he or she observes and analyses the social organizations and belief systems of a group of people chosen for study.

H. Arlo Nimmo, judging from this collection of stories told from his experiences in Sulu where he did field-work as a graduate student, is a good ethnographer. Every story is a testament to his skills of observation and sympathetic understanding of a way of life different from his own. Casually, cameoes and vignettes are drawn of the Bajau people who lived on houseboats on the Pacific archipelago southwest of the main islands of the Philippines. Imperceptibly — by his selection of tales to tell and by his careful choice of details — the anthropologist gently compares his life with the fisher people on houseboats to that of a good North American boy who excelled at his studies.

Sulu is the site of Nimmo's anthropological studies, and the title of the first and last of these sixteen stories. The Sulu of the mid-1960s is thus compared with the Sulu of the 1980s. Nimmo avoids the conservative anthropologists' clamour for a living museum. In sane and pragmatic prose, he makes it clear that human societies are forever in a state of flux, always on a cusp of change, for better or for worse. The in-between tales are about the people he met, those he liked and disliked, during the two years of his field-work. Many of the stories are portraits of these people, such as the title story, "The Songs of Salanda".

Salanda was a beautiful and wayward young woman who sang at ritual festivals and religious occasions round the islands of the Sulu group. She was eventually swindled by a boyfriend and then she returned to her husband with whom she lived as a Plain and Good Wife.

Is *The Songs of Salanda* intended as an example of a local cautionary tale teaching young girls to beware marvellously lupine men with beautiful and devastating smiles, or is this a tale that underlies a social universe working against all women everywhere? The characters are one-dimensional, the action predictable, the denouement unsurprising. A simple moralism shapes the story. Perhaps this simplicity, one of a puritanical moral perspective, is the book's strength and its weakness. For lacking is the novelist's manipulative skill where complexities are transferred through a shedding of self-consciousness to produce another assemblage or form.

The art of splitting from the self the object under discussion and transforming it into the subject of a creative fiction is missing. So Lam, in a story of the same name, is not merely a horrible person who comes to a shocking death; he is a despicable but stock character, the wicked merchant with the beautiful long-suffering wife. On the flip side, in "An Unexpected Source" and with wry good humour, another merchant's family is portrayed in its adversity. Clever and practical intelligence is applied to turn the adversity to advantage, thus to redeem the family of its plight. Positive characters like Masa and Sister Evangelista remain underdeveloped. The reader only knows they are good and kind and people of integrity because Nimmo tells us his favourable view of them. On the other hand, Amak, a pirate, comes across as a hero from American television, a sanitized and fairly attractive wronged bad man. The sadness Nimmo may have experienced for Amak's predictable fate is not conveyed to the reader because his analysis of character is lacking. Nimmo describes, he is an empiricist who, at his best, reveals a kind eye, displays a wry wit. Thus it is not surprising that the best story, "The Remarkable Mrs Dickens", is another version of Graham Green's "Travels with My Aunt", a not so remarkable American experience abroad. In this story, the placement of the detail describing the pinkness of Mrs Dickens' every accoutrement suggests an attention to the craft of story telling missing in Nimmo's more pious descriptive portraits.

The complexities of human nature, one may unkindly assert, are not the terrain of the empiricist who studies the social organization of hu-

mankind. And yet. There is the story “Mike in Manila”. Although this too suffers from the narrator’s passive role in his own retelling of an incident involving a twenty-year-old American boy, and focusing on the sheer fear experienced by the young soldier that he may be killed in Vietnam, it is related with absolute clarity. Its position in the collection reflects Nimmo’s sane recognition that “no man is an island” — no matter how far out on the Sulu archipelago Nimmo too experiences the fear of imminent death through his meeting with Mike. The experience is one of North America, not the Philippines, where it happened.

The passive narrator inhibits strength and resonance in these stories. Nimmo is unable to look into his own heart to find a reflective creature besides his factual self. He develops no persona who is less reserved, less of a gentleman, more impolite, more daringly a risk-taker, or more expansively reflective than the author. By not engaging himself in recording the conversation between Sister Evangelista’s God and Father Raquet who respects Saitan, the spirit of the islands, Nimmo allows sentimentality to seep in to colour his overwhelming goodness.

H. Arlo Nimmo remains to the end the perfect ethnographer. He listens and observes and relates. When he revisited the islands after a twenty-year absence, he is appalled by the disappearance of the life-style he studied, but he does not condemn the changes which took place. He is saddened that the people he had learned to like and admire were dispersed by experiences he, as a young man, could not have envisaged — a favourite island is robbed of its vegetation; a totemic island is stripped and exposed; a pedestrians’ street is transformed into a traffic snarl — nevertheless, a cool intellect reigns. Nimmo writes on the last page:

I realize now that my years in Sulu were a lull in a long, stormy history. The world war was over; the civil war had not yet begun. I know I was very young, the islands were intoxicatingly beautiful, and the passage of time has tended to romanticize my years there. (p. 237)

I recommend these casually paced tales for they are rich resources for the student of anthropology who may want a more personal and less factually dry description of an ethnographic area. For the novelist, there is human interest in recognizing the literary ambition of an academic

anthropologist when he took his first nervous steps up an unknown street in an unknown village to contemplate with excitement the sunsets and the people — and their dramatic possibility as art.

Carolyn van LANGENBERG

---

Carolyn van Langenberg is a writer living in Sydney, Australia. She is writing a novel about the strands that draw Australia and Malaysia together as part of the requirements for her doctoral thesis at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean.