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Not everybody cries

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Five Star Billionaire by [Tash Aw](#)

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What kind of politics of representation is in play if you're writing novels about East Asian countries in English? Is it more complicated or less if you're Malaysian and a Cambridge graduate? Would the way your experience filters into your fiction look different when transferred to, say, a painter? And how might these questions be dramatised in an opaquely symbolic interlude? One set of answers is provided in *Map of the Invisible World* (2009), Tash Aw's second novel, in which a painter who's said to like 'parrots and boys' shows two of the main characters one of his early canvases: a painting of a farmhouse in Germany with oddly shaped cows in the surrounding fields and a young bride and groom drifting through the air. We're in the prewar Dutch East Indies and the painter is Aw's version of Walter Spies, a German primitivist who tried to do for Bali what Gauguin did for Tahiti. His visitors are Margaret, a precocious 15-year-old whose parents are American anthropologists, and Karl, a Dutch artist she's decided she's in love with. Margaret, who has only recently been deriding Bali's European painters as ignorant phoneyes, isn't impressed. Still, Walter presses on:

'This little tableau,' said Walter, 'is full of my conflicting emotions towards my homeland. Nostalgia, longing, but also fear and self-loathing and darkness – all those things are contained in this tiny piece. I did not realise this when I painted it many years ago. When one is young' – he raised his eyebrow and turned to look at Margaret – 'one does not see such things. But now, in the long autumn of my life, I can appreciate all the happiness and indeed the despair that has coloured my life.' He waved his hand at the painting as if to prove his point.

As soon as they had left the compound Margaret dissolved into fits of hysterical laughter.

Karl and Margaret walk up a nearby ridge and settle on the grass – 'a very European thing to do', she says. ('There are bugs and snakes and *things* in Asian grass.') Karl, who was born in Indonesia but grew up in Holland, begins to speak of his unhappy childhood in The Hague, his feeling of being an outsider there, his romantic notions of tropical life and fantasies of

being his Indonesian wet-nurse's son. Arm in arm, they drift back down the ridge, filled with happiness as well as confused emotions to do with homelands and belonging, and in case we're insufficiently reminded of Walter's 'little tableau', a plump cow in a field trains its 'big bright eyes' on Margaret as houses come into view.

Aw – who was born in Taiwan to Malaysian parents, grew up in Kuala Lumpur and trained as a lawyer in England, where he's based – likes to write about characters who are, as he's put it, 'dislocated from their surroundings'. He also likes dropping artworks into his otherwise poker-faced novels as a way of hinting at what he's up to. Yet it's characteristic of his work that the cloudy ironies this episode generates don't give much of a sense of where he hopes to lead the reader. Motifs, parallels and contrasts, chronology, point of view: Aw's instinct appears to be to worry about things of that sort and let the themes look after themselves. And though that's hardly an unusual arrangement of priorities, his work's mixture of patiently accumulated detail, East Asian exoticism, deflations of the same, coolness of voice and storms of operatic passion can make it hard not to wish for a more schematic divide – between, say, kitsch Walters and receptive Karls – to help make sense of it all.

The Harmony Silk Factory (2005), his first novel, centres on Johnny Lim, a poor boy from Western Malaysia who becomes a mini-tycoon via the textile trade, political connections and alleged collaboration with the Japanese during the war. Its opening section, a biographical sketch of Johnny put together by his vengeful son Jasper, is a magic realist vision of colonial Malaya, heavy on acts of ruthless daring, haughty beauties, comically interchangeable British 'Sirs' and sentences like: 'These were times for action, the party said, for the enemy was at the gate; but all Tiger longed for was to grow the perfect guava.' It's done with great energy but the frequent hints that Jasper is phantasmagorically unreliable don't prevent it from getting cloying. Soon, though, the story reconfigures itself around Johnny's marriage to Jasper's mother, Snow Soong, and, more specifically, a trip to some mysterious islands in 1941. On this sort-of honeymoon – during which, we understand, Jasper will be conceived – they're accompanied, for strategically underexplained reasons, by a bluff English administrator, a Japanese secret agent and an English aesthete who's befriended Johnny. A diary written by Snow gives one version of events; another is supplied by the aesthete, who wraps things up from the perspective of old age.

These sections are aimed partly at demystifying Johnny, who turns out to be more vulnerable and sensitive than the armour-plated figure conjured by his son. A related aim is to seize the territory back from the likes of Somerset Maugham, and the Asian characters are mostly given more dignity and agency than the Brits, who are further demoted by being made to speak such lines as: 'Look here, Wormwood, I've had enough of this Bolshevik nonsense. If you want to pick up a gun and fight with those Chinaman commies in the jungle, then you just go ahead.' The plot carries the seeds of a political allegory, with Japanese and English characters squabbling over a Malaysian woman. But the fun Aw has with multiple viewpoints makes Johnny seem unknowable in a way that's sometimes inadvertently hard to distinguish from Maughamesque 'inscrutability'. The novel unwinds in an extended bout of high-camp

desert island melodrama in which everyone is always weeping uncontrollably, communicating by means of arias from *Don Giovanni*, or, in Snow's case, tiptoeing off for some high-speed fire-lit diarising. Even the bluff administrator succumbs, at one point calling the aesthete 'a right little vixen'.

Map of the Invisible World puts a similarly sharp spike on the emotional temperature chart as it struggles to bring a looser assemblage of storylines to a conclusion. Generally, though, it's more controlled, with less cartoonish focal characters and, early on, a good line in Robert Stone-like unease. The main action takes place in Indonesia during Sukarno's confrontation with Malaysia, and again there's the germ of an allegory: at the heart of the plot are two orphaned boys who've been separated and brought up in the contending states. Karl – who raised the younger brother, Adam, in Indonesia – gets swept up by the police in the 1964 purge of communists. Setting out to find him, Adam falls into the role of a wide-eyed innocent among student radicals; he also makes contact with Margaret, who gives the novel access to another level of politics by dealing with journalists, CIA men and, in one scene, Sukarno. Adam and Margaret's back stories gradually move to centre stage and cause everyone to burst into tears.

Among the novel's minor characters is a young woman called Zubaidah. An advocate of non-violent revolution, she's the most serious of the novel's radical types until the plot requires her to make peace with her elite background in order to rescue Adam, whom she then takes to bed. As if dissatisfied with this outcome, Aw has another go at such a figure – an educated Asian idealist who's both troubled and freed to act by her family's dodgy wealth – in the person of Yinghui, one of five Chinese Malaysians whose intersecting activities in near-contemporary Shanghai are mapped out at a leisurely pace in *Five Star Billionaire*. The others are Phoebe, an undocumented migrant and naive reader of guides to getting rich quick; Gary, a manufactured but authentically gifted pop star trying to break into the mainland market; Justin, the adopted scion of a rich commercial family, in town to do a property deal; and Walter, who claims – he's alone among the characters in addressing the reader in the first person – to be an entrepreneur so understatedly minted that few people have heard of him. Apart from big-city sadness, the main current of feeling comes from their collective back story, which has to do with dispossession and corruption in 1980s Malaysia.

In the novel's present all this adds up to a reportorial, mildly satirical panorama of a boom town. Street-level duties are handled by Phoebe, who bluffs her way from a factory in Guangdong to a job as a receptionist at a posh spa owned by Yinghui. Self-trained in aspiration, she's frequently the object of a somewhat disdainful irony as she decks herself out in fake designer gear in an effort to ensnare a rich man. ('The moment she walked into the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf café on Wujiang Lu, she sensed that her impressive personal styling was drawing attention.') Justin rubs shoulders with vapid starlets before having a nervous breakdown and taking to his bed. His mission – converting one of the city's few remaining old buildings into a cultural centre – falls through when his family's insurance business collapses. Happily, or so it seems, Walter has plans for the site, and Yinghui – who's just been

nominated for a business award when we first meet her – sees no problem with his conditions for bringing her on board, which are that she mortgage everything she owns and put the money in a joint account. Gary's career falls apart and, when not chatting to Phoebe through a dating site, he takes to his bed too.

Most of these storylines come together, or don't, in ways that aren't difficult for the reader to anticipate, with an emphasis on misunderstandings, deceptions and the crushing of wishful dreams. The master-metaphors – demolished heritage, counterfeit goods – aren't too insistent, and in keeping with the downbeat atmosphere the climax trades in missed connections rather than suddenly amped-up feelings. Not everybody cries. The chapters detailing Phoebe's journey through factories and slums have strong how-things-work appeal, but the plot obliges Aw to be considerably less curious about large business transactions, and the characters' meditations on the city are often couched in sententious travelogue-speak. ('You arrived thinking you were going to use Shanghai to get what you wanted, and it would take time before you realised it was using you'.) The 1980s Malaysian scenes are consistently more effective, especially when Aw starts getting his teeth into the well-off, foreign-educated social circles of Yinghui's and Justin's youth. The mother who plays down her husband's chauffeur-driven car by banging on about the price of vegetables at every opportunity, the boyfriend who buries himself in the *LRB* in order to avoid discussing emotional commitments: these characters – with their tacit agreement, regarding their own wealth, that 'ignorance was by far the best way to advance social change' – monopolise Aw's best writing.

The main problem with this – a problem in *Map of the Invisible World* too – is Aw's handling of the double time scheme. Very frequent flashbacks are his chief device for moving both levels along in tandem, but he isn't good at integrating them into dramatic action. Often such action as there is seems merely a pretext for further flashbacks. And since the events flashed back to are as likely to be recounted as fully dramatised, long stretches of the novel read like an inert précis that's been put into the past tense. It's a shame, because Aw can write a decent scene when he chooses, clearly puts a lot of thought into the architecture of his novels, knows many interesting things about East Asia and writes women pretty well. If he were the 'soulful folk guitarist' he drops into *Five Star Billionaire* 'whose slang-rich lyrics spoke of urban migration and loneliness', a sound engineer with his interests at heart would encourage him to turn off his delay pedal.

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