



By the Tale of the Dragonfly

Vincent Hancock

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*In its inquisitive and positive accounts of world traveling, the historical novel *By the Tale of the Dragonfly* follows a former soldier living life on his own terms in the wake of WWII.*

In Vincent Hancock's historical novel *By the Tale of the Dragonfly*, an ex-pat has seafaring adventures, and makes discoveries, after World War II.

The novel, based on five family journals from the postwar period, amplifies a true story with summaries, photographs, and background information. In it, Rex, who worked in Special Intelligence with the British military during the war, becomes a mercenary treasure hunter and deep-sea diver, running guns, contraband, and sometimes people around Malaysia and Indonesia.

The book's journal format organization is loose. Each day is represented by a new entry; these, in the place of a central conflict or climax, are an easy blend of danger and delight. As often as they feature pirates, sharks, or monsoons, they also cover delicious meals, sex, and colorful vignettes from places visited.

Rex is seen on a quest for personal integrity and autonomy, seeking his own moral limits and knowing that his activities are illegal and risky. Addressing his descendants, he gives advice about authority, politics, and love and passes on general life lessons. His free-form narration is an intentional counterpoint to the "rigid rat race" he fled after the war.

The book is peopled with rogues and eccentrics, including Rex's business partner, Roy (also ex-military), who spent years as a prisoner of war. Ali, who has three wives, and Zainal, who is loyal and trustworthy, are the chief crew members on Rex's boat. Women are present for admiring, including Rex's housekeeper, who treats ailments with natural remedies, and a woman he marries who was the mistress of a friend. Affairs with Chinese business women arise, too.

But despite all of these interactions, the book's dialogue is minimal; Rex's relationships are compartmentalized, in adherence with his live-and-let-live policy. Rex's self-discovery is the main objective, and novel experiences—dolphin sightings, beautiful sunsets, underwater finds, and significant sexual encounters—are given more attention than relationships with people.

In addition to its journal entries, the book incorporates recipes, ancient and modern histories, myths, poems, and philosophical reflections, both Rex's own and those quoted from others. Nautical terminology and foreign language terms are explained, resulting in a rich and informative portrait of seafaring life. Still, the war hangs in the background of it all: Rex has flashbacks and nightmares, and Roy has PTSD. In the places Rex visits, people express fear and loathing toward Japan, and nods to world events acknowledge that ruling parties still vie for power, while landmines and destruction dot world landscapes.

With inquisitive and positive accounts of world traveling, the historical novel *By the Tale of the Dragonfly* follows a

former soldier who's living life on his own terms in the wake of WWII.

MARI CARLSON (June 30, 2020)

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