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Foreword Review SHORT STORIES

Lake Like a Mirror

Ho Sok Fong
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Malaysian Chinese author Ho Sok Fong writes from the point of view of the dispossessed and downtrodden. Her striking short story collection *Lake Like a Mirror* unveils a lesser-known side of Malaysia, wherein minority women struggle to eke out meaningful existences despite cultural and ethnic constraints.

From the opening story, “The Wall,” in which an elderly woman’s imprisonment in her home takes on mythical proportions, an air of disquiet hangs over Ho’s work. Even a lighthearted tale such as “Radio Drama,” in which housewives gossip at the local hairdresser, concludes in melancholic fashion with an anecdote about a tragic romance.

Blending the matter-of-fact and the surreal, Ho’s prose culls striking images from everyday life. A beat-up chest comes to represent the unexpressed sorrows of an old storekeeper, while a carnival ride becomes an unexpected escape for a lonely woman when a family joins her.

At other points, the mundane and the uncanny collide, as in the delicate “March in a Small Town,” in which a bored hotel desk clerk becomes obsessed with a guest who may possibly be a ghost. Ho also proves adept at picaresque adventures with “October,” in which a Japanese expatriate and a blowhard local military man embark on a bizarre hot-air balloon ride.

Lake Like a Mirror is at its most powerful when Ho confronts the difficulties of living in Malaysia’s strict Muslim society. The title story centers on a well-meaning teacher who lands in trouble when she encourages a closeted gay student to express himself. The collection’s centerpiece, the heartbreaking “Aminah,” chronicles life in a Muslim reeducation center, in which disenfranchised women who have lost faith in Islam are subjected to daily brainwashing. In these stories, Ho demonstrates how psychic wounds can aggregate over time, as her characters persist through sheer resilience.

Ho Sok Fong’s fable-like constructions are sometimes cryptic, often surprising, and almost always moving.

HO LIN (March / April 2020)

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