

The Best of Gowanus: New Writing from Africa Asia and the Caribbean

Thomas J. Hubschman, Editor

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Selected from Gowanus, the web magazine devoted to the contemporary writings of third-world authors, this anthology enlightens its audience with a thought-provoking mélange of essays and short stories. The reader is constantly challenged, not only by the stark, sometimes grim subject matter, but also by abrupt changes in theme and style from one piece to the next.

A poignant memoir of the Bosnian war is juxtaposed with a humorous account of the plight of the white establishment in newly independent Zimbabwe. "Bridges and Trees," a story by Cairo author Ellen Larson, is permeated with a sense of history and the power of tradition in the face of constant change. A radically different slant on the value of tradition is offered by Arlene Ang, whose protagonist in "A Death in the Family" is a young Chinese-Filipino who feels the oppressive weight of a lifetime spent struggling with ancestral customs that have no meaning for him.

South African author David Herman's biting political commentary, "The Lady and the Tiger," is a fierce indictment of the recent activities of Winnie Mandela and her supporters. Along with Richard Czujko's "The Transformation of Sleepy Hollow," it is one of several illuminating essays, imbued with well-crafted writing, which brings to life recent changes in distant countries of Asia and Africa, graphically shedding light on behind-the-scenes consequences of the nightly news clips viewed by a numbed U.S. television audience. These social issues are perhaps best represented by the Croatian teacher conscripted into the Yugoslavian army in Viktor Car's "The Big Lie," who feels grateful to the White House for the efforts finally being made in his part of the world, though they are "500,000 corpses overdue."

Not all the offerings are heavy with such deep messages—there are several delightfully humorous pieces, such as Vasanthi Victor's "Long Journey," a tale of how an Indian wife's vivid imagination makes her long and tedious trip by rail come alive with real and imagined possibilities of intrigue. The final story is pure science fiction and takes place six centuries in the future. It is a fitting close for this eclectic compilation of writings by emerging authors who will be enriching us for years to come.

DEBORAH DONOVAN (September / October 2001)

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