

Introduction

It was Lord Byron, I believe, who had once observed that truth was very strange, always stranger than fiction. The more I became acquainted with the lives of others, the more I saw that Byron was on to something. Take the Bohemian life of Katherine Mansfield, for instance. She met a singing teacher at the age of 21, married him after three weeks and abandoned him the morning after the wedding. Or take the sexually mercurial Anaïs Nin, who confessed to telling so many lies that she kept cards of her lies in a “lie box” to keep them all straight.

When I started writing fiction full time after my second retirement in 1989, I knew my stories could never catch up with such realities. Nonetheless, I wanted to have a shot at that overwrought dream of my youth, of becoming a practitioner of the literary art.

So I began by submitting myself to a strict writing regime and adhering to it for more than two decades. I took it as a personal form of amusement, of the kind many educated Chinese indulged in during retirement. History is full of examples of scholars and former officials retreating to mountain huts to practise painting or calligraphy, compose poems or pluck upon string instruments. My father, for instance, took to writing poetry in his declining years. In the West, I imagine such people would be placed on a par with Sunday painters.

Although I had managed to complete a fair number of short stories and two novels over the years, and had the good fortune to get them all published, I never earned anything from them. It was true that decades earlier, when I was young and impoverished, I had accepted payments for two stories published in the *Pacific Spectator* in America and one from the *Evening Standard* in London. But thereafter all fees and royalties went to charities.

Now, if I were to write a story about a Hong Kong man working for decades without a monetary return, most readers would find such a tale

highly implausible. But that was Byron's point; facts were often stranger than fiction. On that realisation, I decided in 2011, after the publication of my second novel, *The Embrace of Harlots*, to give up writing fiction. I had, in any case, exhausted most of the ideas I wanted to express through that genre. Any more would have been sheer repetition.

That decision left me with the need for an alternative form of amusement. The established routine of writing seven days a week, from after breakfast till lunch time, had to be replaced. I had by chance settled upon three regular luncheon appointments each week, with different friends, after which I would visit doctors, dentists, barbers, bankers and assorted stores and supermarkets to stock up my larder or my medicine chest. Once in a while, I would take in a play or a cinema. On the days without appointments, however, I would write after lunch as well.

An obvious alternative to writing would be to do more reading. But that was not feasible because I was already devoting my evenings to reading. Any more would overstrain my ageing eyes. And, at the age of 82, I was no longer capable of indulging in the more adventurous or taxing pastimes of my youth.

Thus I found myself at a loose end. I surrendered myself to desultory reminiscing and daydreaming. But one morning, I found myself humming Stephen Sondheim's song from *A Little Night Music*.

“Ev’ry day a little death
On the lips and in the eyes,
In the movements, in the pauses,
In the gestures, in the sighs,
Ev’ry day a little dies.”

That tune did not make me feel maudlin, however; far from it. I had long prepared for the inevitable and was actually quite relaxed about the

prospect of meeting the Grim Reaper. I had suffered and survived pancreatic and other forms of cancer; so I had had a pretty good run for my money. I was curious to find out what Shakespeare's "undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns . . ." had in store.

So thinking, I began meditating upon death. It occurred to me that the whole thing might turn out to be just one huge cosmic joke. Upon reaching that "undiscovered country", one might well find the spirits of all the departed waiting there, breaking out in uproarious laughter at one's belated arrival and clapping their transparent hands on one's phantom shoulders. Or perhaps one might find confirmation of the Taoist notion of a return to the original Nothingness. In either case, it would be enormous fun to uncover definitively the answer to that ancient puzzle.

In line with that thinking, I began recalling, one by one, the many bosom friends, lovers and family members I had associated with over my long life. Some episodes had taken place under circumstances which were highly unlikely and, indeed, often stranger than fiction. The people involved had nonetheless enriched me and deepened my understanding of life. Thinking about some of them made me yearn to share once again a drink, a meal or a companionable silence with them.

All of a sudden, I realised that most of them had departed and, with the passage of so many decades, I had turned into the sole keeper of their memories. When I slough off my mortal coils, there would be no one left to tell of their kindness, generosity, loving nature, helpfulness, patience and selflessness. For all their individual flaws and fortes, they had each lived life with dignity and splendour. It was then that I decided I had to write about them, in the hope of prolonging their existence a little beyond my own demise. I had no illusion that whatever I write would be just another barely noticeable speck tossed into that infinite river of Time.

But before I could write about them, I realised I had to provide a context. It meant explaining the circumstances under which they and I had behaved and interacted. That faced me with a number of issues. I had led a life that could not be regarded as exemplary. Moreover, I was by instinct and by the habits and genes of my ancestors a very private person. Yet, in explaining the circumstances of our interactions, I had to be forthright, detailing my unworthy deeds as well as those odd commendable ones. Otherwise, the whole narrative would lack the ring of truth.

I had been much influenced during my youth by the first memoir I read. It was St. Augustine's *Confessions*. The frankness and honesty with which that fourth century theologian had recounted his youthful escapades -- while travelling along the road to redemption and sainthood -- had taken me aback. It had all the makings of a philosophical and psychological striptease.

Of course, reading about that Algerian saint also took me back to the frightening explanations given by my maternal grandfather, the first Anglican Bishop of Canton, asserting I had been born with Original Sin. St. Augustine had also been a firm believer in that inherent wickedness in mankind. He and my grandfather had both been cut from the same theological cloth. I had been sceptical about it all at the time but had no alternative theory to offer.

Although by modern standards my sins and misdeeds might not have been *that* bad, I was loath to reveal anything private, especially when others had been involved. I could also see, however, that I could not do justice to the stories of the people I wanted to write about without revealing something of myself. Therefore I had to make a compromise and do a little stripping. Perhaps a little teasing as well.

But I should give fair warning; I should not be expected to meet the high standards set by St. Augustine. There would be no full monty from

me. With that caveat, I began to write this narrative, the first volume of which has already been published by Epigram Books under the title *Adrift: My Childhood in Colonial Singapore* in June of 2015.

The focus for this volume and the next one will be largely about my working experiences in Hong Kong, especially those as an Administrative Officer in the colonial government. For want of a better and more apt description for the entire series, I have called the whole thing a family memoir.

I have packed into the narrative a fair bit of Chinese and Hong Kong history. I make no apology for that. Learning from the past is essential for any society to progress. Sadly, as Hegel has pointed out, people and governments never learn from history or act according to the principles deduced from it. In Hong Kong, this has been particularly true. Many aspects of its history have been hidden under the cloak of colonial propaganda or kept secret for far too long. It is time to give them some decent airings and some overdue reassessments.

In this respect, however, it is important to point out that the history I am offering has been retrieved mainly from oral accounts passed down from others, from my personal experiences as an Administrative Officer -- which consisted largely of being a bit player in the far larger events unfolding on the political stage -- and from certain secret documents to which I had access. This narrative does not pretend to be the result of meticulous research and scholarship. Anyone interested in any facet of the stories I have touched upon is strongly encouraged to probe more deeply elsewhere. I will supply as many clues on source materials as I can.

Conventional wisdom has it that history is always written by winners or victors. Well, my version is decidedly written from the point of view of one on the losing side. A person who has spent almost his entire life as a third rate citizen under foreign colonial rule can hardly be regarded as

anything other than a loser.

Self-government, of course, does not necessarily guarantee good governance. The sorry events in too many ex-colonial territories bear testimony to that stark reality. But such cumbersome and extended journeys have to be made, if a people were to move towards political maturity and a sense of nationhood.

I hope my narrative will provoke some self-examination by Hong Kong citizens and by others interested in specific parts of the ex-colony's past.

Finally, I cannot close without paying homage to the ordinary people of Hong Kong, a tough and rambunctious lot, who had taken everything that outrageous fortune could have thrown at them and had ended up surviving and enduring.

Oscar Wilde once asserted that everyone owes History a duty to rewrite it. Perhaps when he made that statement he was conveying a measure of wisdom in addition to his famous wit.

Inspired by that piece of advice, I picked up my pen.