

Portrait of the artist as a young man

Tall Tales and Misadventures of a Young Westernized Oriental Gentleman
By Goh Poh Seng
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GOH POH SENG was a literary pioneer. He wrote Singapore's first novel *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) which depicts the hopes and frustrations of young people in the newly independent country.

He also wrote the 1966 play about family life titled *When Smiles Are Done*, which represents an early attempt to capture Singlish on stage. To do that, he spent a year and a half "hanging around public places with a tape recorder and listening to how people spoke".

Goh died in 2010 at the age of 73. But even though he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1995, he continued to write short stories, a number of which appear in this new book published posthumously by Ridge Books of NUS Press.

Tall Tales and Misadventures of a Young Westernized Oriental Gentleman is a collection of stories about his student days in 1950s Ireland where he had been sent at the age of 16 by his Malaysian family to study towards becoming a doctor.

It appears that it was in Ireland that Goh truly came of age. Bright, curious and cocky (he refers to himself as a "sexy fellow"), he led a bohemian lifestyle despite having earlier converted to Catholicism "on account of acute loneliness and homesickness".

He hung out with actors, artists and writers. He loved the opera and recited poetry to friends. He lost his virginity to an American girl after running with her naked down the beach. His flatmate was a homosexual Trinidadian aesthete ("my first homosexual friend") who exposed him to life's finer things like fashion and jazz.

Oddly enough, although Goh went on to practise medicine in Singapore for 25 years upon his return to these parts, he barely writes about it in this book. Instead,

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you get passages on end devoted to his love for literature and writers and his determination to become one.

He recounts humorously how he courted the friendship of Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh who rebuffed him repeatedly, then chastised him for dreaming of becoming a poet because it guaranteed a life of poverty. Goh replied somewhat melodramatical-

ly: "I don't care if I'm rich or poor, so long as I can write poetry." (Later, he would say: "... I really had no evidence of my worth as a poet. But I did feel like a poet and I couldn't explain it.")

There is also a hilarious incident where Goh goes to a play by *avant garde* dramatist Samuel Beckett. After watching the same production two more times, the director introduced Goh to Beckett as "the young Chinaman who laughed throughout your play". Beckett replied: "Well then, he is the one who understands the play."

Tall Tales and Misadventures is neither an autobiography nor memoir, but its collection of stories serves as a pithy portrait of the artist as a young man.

Apart from showing Goh's youthful impetuosity, it also evokes sometimes humorously the sexual ethos of 1950s Ireland which, as a young thin Asian man hoping to score with women of almost any race, Goh had to navigate.

Mostly though, the book is a testimony to how much Goh loved the written word and how that passion would one day turn him into a literary trailblazer.

His self-castigations then ("... Rimbaud had retired from poetry when he was 17! Yes, fella, retired, and at 17!.... You will be just you, a no-body. A plain non-poet") may appear humorous on hindsight. But they propelled him to overcome the odds which, according to him, were that for "every thousand doctors there could only be one writer".