

**TALL TALES AND
MISADVENTURES OF A YOUNG
WESTERNISED ORIENTAL
GENTLEMAN**

By Goh Poh Seng
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★★★★☆

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Young Westernized
Oriental Gentleman

Goh Poh Seng



Poet, playwright, novelist, impresario and nightclub owner, the late Goh Poh Seng was a cultural livewire in Singapore from the 1960s to 1986, when he emigrated with his family to Canada.

This slim volume of short stories about his formative years as a medical student in 1950s Ireland trains the spotlight on the young Goh who hungered to be a writer and threw himself into the culture and nightlife of Dublin. Never mind that as one of the few foreign students in the city, “we were conspicuous and exotic, like rare orchids, or some such thing”.

As his final book, which he was working on before his death in 2010, the memoir is a breezy, jocular read that sees Goh shedding much of the self-consciousness and overwrought prose of earlier novels such as *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) and *A Dance Of Moths* (1995).

Tall Tales And Misadventures begins with a teenage Goh boarding a passenger liner from Singapore to Southampton with his extended family seeing him off – a rite of passage for young men and women making that journey across the seas in colonial times, carrying the weight of their entire clan’s dreams on their shoulders.

The gawky boy who throws up repeatedly during the three-week sea odyssey soon turns into a rakish young man who holds court at tea dances with female Asian students. His circle of friends and yearning for new experiences grow. Before long, he is flatmates with a Trinidadian charmer, getting invited to dinner parties in lavish country houses, and weeping and laughing at a Samuel Beckett play.

The “Westernised Oriental Gentleman” referred to in the title, or WOG, is the equivalent of today’s “banana” – yellow on the outside, white on the inside. Goh, however, does not belabour the identity politics, and simply accepts with light-hearted equanimity that he is far more immersed in the literature and language of his so-called colonial masters than of his Chinese ancestors.

What emerges is a portrait of an outsider who comes to feel at home in his adopted city and a book that is comfortable in its own skin. It ends somewhat abruptly with Goh deciding to drop out of medical school to become a writer. In real life, the author did return to complete his degree, so the story feels unfinished.

Nonetheless, if one sees his four earlier novels as variations on the coming-of-age of a male protagonist, then the author’s own journey of self-discovery in *Tall Tales* proves more engaging, shot through with wry observations about life and joie de vivre.

If you like this, read: *The Immolation* (Epigram Books, paperback, 2011, \$17.90 from shop.epigram-books.sg), Goh’s uneven but powerful 1977 war novel about the dark side of dedication to a political cause.

Clarissa Oon