



BOOK REVIEWS

By V.L. Mendiola

The Wonderful World of Books

Antonia Fraser, Ed. 1992. **The Pleasure of Reading**. London, Bloomsberg, 256 pp.

Some books never age nor stale; Fraser's edited book is one of those. One never gets tired re-reading it late in the night or even before the rosy fingers of dawn creep into the mist, to borrow Homeric words.

Woven in three strands, the book under review reveals three intertwining themes: a) reading as a childhood or youthful passion, although late bloomers easily, doggedly catch up; b) the stirring of the imagination; and c) the instilling of "creative fear" in children enough to push them probably to write vehemently in the foreseeable future.

Since the (English) writers asked to note down how they acquired the lifelong reading habit to the surfeit of addiction and personal choices of texts, almost everyone listed their favoured titles of ten books, some forty (40) British authors—to name some—Lessing, Byatt, Spender, Fowles, Mortimer, Stoppard, Atwood, Cookson, Ballard—a handful of Irish contemporary writers, together with a sprinkling of Nigerian, Syrian, Indian, Australian, Italian established fictionists, playwrights, essayists, editors, etc. give us readers some unusual/arbitrary preferences or favourites (a few, though readily admit it as outright "lie"). Their choices range from the classic—Beowulf, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, to Austen, Brontes, Dickens, Hardy, Joyce, Woolf, Conrad, Lawrence, Golding, Coetzee even to modern poets, Heaney, Larkin, among others. Otherwise, some American writers complete their listing—Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Melville, Steinbeck, Dickinson, Elliot, Stevens,

Pound, McCullers or contemporary Afro-American authors like Morrison or Walker. A number of European writers top their choices—the Russian Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Gorky, Chekhov, Solzhenitsyn, Bulgakov; the French Flaubert, Balzac, Stendhal, de Laclos, Proust, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Camus, Prevert; to the German Mann, Kafka, Heine, Nietzsche; the Greek Homer, Aeschylus, Cavafy, Kazantsakis, and only a handful of Third World renowned writers like Achebe, Naipaul and Rushdie.

Equally, juvenile literature has fascinated a pretty number of novelists, barristers, and journalist – contributors in their early formative years. Such classics as the animal stories of Beatrix Potter, the Grimm Brothers’ fairytales, **Winnie the Pooh**, adolescents texts of **Treasure Island**, the **Lord of the Rings**, **Gulliver’s Travel**, **Alice in Wonderland**, to drop some titles or biographies, music books, opera, gardening, trees, shrubs, letters, journals, dictionaries, atlases, philosophy (What Catholics taste, indeed!), comics, abridged classics, even illustrated novels – incidentally the illustration executed by some 40 illustrators as well could feast the eyes alone – abstract designs, surrealistic art work, psychedelic paintings, Picasso-like creations and what-have-you to please readers, as they leaf through the glossy pages.

More than what John Fowles, renowned for his meta-fiction, **The French Lieutenant Woman**, that fuses the novel with history, travelogue, art, avers to the effect that the “terrible and crippling atrophy of the imaginative faculty” for the youth partiality to the idiot box, he indicts the failure of the educational system to teach the distinction of reading fiction and non-fiction. In his own words, “Their aims are diametrically opposed in many ways; learning to dream awake, against learning to absorb hard facts; almost to be objective, become what society expects.”

Need we say more?

The Migration of the Heart

Bill Ong Hing. 2006. **Deporting Our Souls (Values, Morality, and Immigration Policy)**. Cambridge University Press, 237 pp.

For many months now, thousands of Syrian refugees desperately try to reach Europe to flee the political turmoil obtaining in their war-torn country. But a number of countries in the European Union either reject them to immigrate to their states except Germany whose citizens remain ambivalent, if not divided towards the newcomers, despite Prime Minister Angela Merkel's nodding approval. Hence, the contemporaneity, value or relevance of the book under review.

In the same vein, at this writing, with the horrendous carnage in the ISIS terrorists simultaneous attack in some parts in France and US President Obama's attempt to legalize the stay, not deport, some 4 million undocumented immigrants has met split reactions of the Republicans so that the President has brought the ticklish issue to the Supreme Court. Such disturbing news items bring ripples of economic socio-political effect in the world and in American society, especially now that the nation braces itself for the incoming national election next year. To think that the USA has been built (and progressed), finally emerging as the most powerful country in the world on account of immigrants' contribution is, indeed paradoxical. Again, herein probably lies the cogency or potency of Hing's book. Note that even its title veers towards a compassionate, humanistic stance.

This must-have-book discusses five major issues linked with immigration policy areas in American governance: a) undocumented workers, b) the immigration selection system, c) deportation of aggravated felons, d) national

security and immigration policy, and e) the integration of new Americans.

Hing, a Chinese – American immigrant himself analyzes those issues backed up by empirical data, cross references, Senate bills and congressional hearings, Constitutional provisions, laws, statutes, and copious footnotes, and therefore, extensive readings/research. He knows from where he speaks of, being a professor of law and Asian – American studies at UC-Davis. Moreover, his credentials report that he has litigated before the U.S. Supreme Court, besides writing a number of books on immigration.

For the first problem aforesaid, Hing avers that instead of demonizing the undocumented (read TNT’s – illegal Filipino entrants to the U.S. to refer to the constantly hiding Pinoys, “wetbacks” for the Mexicans (who cross the **Rio Grande** between Texas and Mexico), FOB’s (fresh-off-the-boat or simply ‘boat people’ from Vietnam refugees, Puerto Ricans, Cubans or other Latinos), the barrister– professor thinks aloud that they be viewed as “human beings entering for a better life (in America) who have been manipulated by globalization, regional economies and social structures that have generated for generations.”Furthermore, he suggests that the flow of migrants, especially from border Mexico be legalized, much more for guestworkers who deserve respect from the Americans themselves, and the government focus more on looking for international terrorists and drug smugglers (or the worsening human trafficking, if one may add).

Certainly the 9/11 terrorist attack of the Twin Towers in New York has brought the issue of deporting “aggravated felons” (for thievery, murder, rape, drug, and other related incidents of heinous crimes) appears far from being moot or academic. Since the national security poses grave threat, the INS has to strictly, religiously implement

immigration policies (selection, limitation through quota system, “chain immigration” where very close relatives or kinship are prioritized – e.g. parents of the petitioner, siblings, children below the age of 18 – after a number of years, of almost a-waiting-for-Godot-syndrome. Yet Hing reduces the seemingly, unfair, unjust treatment of immigrants as sort of demonization, worst still – dehumanization, citing the American subtext of utter denial/rejection because “they take (American Jobs), they cost a lot, they commit crimes, they don’t speak English, they damage the environment, they don’t share our values, and they are different.” Deconstructed, it actually simmers down to XENOPHOBIA, pure racism, inhumanity, much against the constitutional provision of George Washington’s noun phrasing in 1783 – “the policy of humanity”.

The barrister, to objectify and push his arguments, as though his very life hangs on them, presents sufficient case studies of Latinos, Filipinos, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean and Arab Sikh immigrants – all victims of the narrowness of racial bigotry, even Americans reducing the knotty problem of recalcitrant’s after release from prison into mere recidivism – that is, relapsing into crime. Rather than demonstrate this Foucauldian sense of “othering”, Hing advocates compassion, relational justice, giving immigrant felons who go wayward under the influence of the American system – of social construct, of intolerance, of cold indifference – as they reach for the elusive American dream, but refused a second chance to live the “American Way”. Positively then, he concludes his book with a happy, optimistic, note. Only through rehabilitation, trust, the involvement of the national, local governments, the community, the school civic clubs, the individual American join efforts in extending the “welcome wagon” for the new Americans.

On Surviving a Repressive Regime

Azar Nafisi. 2003. **Reading Lolita in Tehran** (A Memoir in Books). New York; Random House, 347 pp.

Who was it that aptly measures the weight of books? “Inside books there is a perfect space and it is the space which allows the reader to deal with the normal problems of gravity.”

Indeed, much gravitas weighs on us readers, when we celebrate with the Iranian writer – professor – critic Nafisi’s memoir based on her personal experiences at the University of Tehran (1979-81), and later at the Free Islamic University and the University of Allameh Tabatai. Being an iconoclast – a non-conformist (and proud of it) to traditional Islamic practices, such as the wearing of *purdah*, Nafisi is expelled from the academe more for defying the law rather than her teaching efficiency in her discipline – literature. But her devotion and zealotry to her profession goads her on gathering some seven equally devoted and zealous students in her own house where they discuss Austen, Conrad, James, Nabokov, Bellow, among others to their heart content in between sipping Turkish coffee and relishing pastry, far from the encroaching, stifling, choking grip of the Islamic Republic, which for all intents and purposes, “uses religion as an instrument of power... and ideology or ideological approach to faith” so as to curtail freedom of expression, of thought, of choice as much as suppress individuality, creativity, uniqueness. After all, the late Ayatollah Khomeini’s mantra (or obsession?) was to purge Iran of the ‘decadence’ of Western culture and all that it stands for – books, films, clothing, politics, permissiveness in society, governance, values in general.

But why Nabokov's novel **Lolita** or his short story, "Invitation to a Beheading", even Austen's **Pride and Prejudice** when this English novelist poses apolitical in her works, let alone James, as he glorifies the bourgeoisie, their luxurious, elegant, highly Europeanized life? Or Bellow's existential musings on loneliness, on despair, on the isolation or despondency of the human condition? Precisely, because Nafisi insists, Nabokov has compassion for the victims of Humbert's cruelty, perversion, but more important, the Russian – American fictionist teaches the first lesson in democracy – "all individuals no matter how contemptible, have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". Comparably, Austen's further theme dwells on "cruelty, not under extraordinary circumstances, but ordinary ones, committed by people like us," just as the novels of the Jewish – American Bellow gravitate towards "private cruelties, about the ordeal of freedom, the burden of choice – so are James's – of taking responsibility for one's decision." Analogously, the very same flaws the Iranian Establishment of Ayatollah Kohmeini had committed against its citizens. The small details, however, of women University students sporting Rebok underneath their chador or the natives buying satellite dish on European, American films in the blackmarket or the rulers' double standard morality tellingly express their defiance of stringent rules on ethics, if not reveal a veneer of decorum, even hypocrisy. .

When Nafis' could no longer find self-fulfillment in her job and personal existence in Iran (This, despite the invitation to teach in other universities and the auditing of other students in her class to the brim – those who favor her political stance – to her, though, it is more existential – against those who oppose it), she opts to immigrate to America, a decision much protested by the "magician" (metaphorically, her alter ego) and her engineer husband also

a government employee, Before doing so, however, her circle of esteemed students confesses to her their inability to face headlong the burden of their personal lives, away from the beck and call of the fictive world and the novelistic discourse of the classroom, a dilemma imposed on Nafisi by these students hermetically sealed from the harsher reality of life. She reminds them uncondescendingly that personal choices and decisions tempered by full responsibility all reflect the aftermath of an oppressive regime, let alone produce the debilitating effects on the psyche of a subjugated people.

Nafisi's memoir has intertextuality with Dai Sijie's novel, **Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress**, set against the backdrop of the infamous Cultural Revolution that bans Western classics (and therefore, the wonder of reading among the literati due to their "decadence" and the reeducation of the "young intellectuals" forcibly required to live and work with the poor peasants in the country side. In contrast, the difference, lies in the personal, intimate account that at times reaches a sense of poetic lyricism that the Iranian academician shows in her book; her confession in the epilogue betrays her (romantic) idealism to the effect that no matter how she left Iran, the country has never left her; moreover, the students and others she had taught in the motherland (whose personal and professional lives she must have indelibly touched), have changed for the better, as they live their own lives later on. Their own epiphanies in the long run could be the essence of real, workable education – drawing out the best in students.