

LOOKING AT PENANG

Carolyn van Langenberg

*Carolyn van Langenberg is an Australian writer. **fish lips** is a short story by her featuring Penang. Following it is an article reflecting on the inspirational Penang of a romanticised historic imagining, the Other, which differs from the contemporary Penang she learned to know and love.*

*Carolyn van Langenberg adalah seorang penulis Australia. **fish lips** adalah sebuah cerpen beliau yang menceritakan tentang Pulau Pinang. Makalah berikut ini merenung Pulau Pinang sebagai sumber ilham khayalan sejarah romantis yang berbeza daripada Pulau Pinang masakini yang beliau kenali dan cintai.*

- *fish lips* -

What is more active than the life of the psyche, with its reactions, its multiple impressions, its swells, its dreams, its memories?

-Germaine Dulac, - *Cine magazine*, no. 28, Juli 11, 1924: 67-68, as quoted in *To desire differently* by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis

Rose will be remembered.

At formal dinners and at cocktail parties, the intellectuals will hasten to describe her in a language whose blandness will reveal their inability to comprehend her better and her less than good qualities. They will agree that she may have been a victim of her time and place in history, exchange opinions about her femininity, her lack of feminism and censure the past for its inequities, but they will not have the wit to understand how well she knew her chances.

Advertisers, too, will reproduce her, and they will wrap her image round their shell fish. They will press her full lips against the wet glass of their beer

bottles. They will copy her dresses which they will shamelessly market as ready-to-wear replicas, and they will believe she was a woman compromised by a greater love of diamonds than of life.

They will not understand the depth of her love, it may be said, because they value sex above surrendering to passionate happiness.

But Rose will not flatter these describers of outlines, these students of ephemera, with her contempt. Rather, she will pity their dependence on a single photograph of a face which once belonged to her. For from lips long since nibbled by fish, Rose may sing with the evening tide washing the shores of Penang Island, once the Pearl of the Orient.

Rose chose to be elusive.

Socially she was involved in revolution taking as she did Wang Li-tsieng as her lover, crossing the barriers established by the British Colonial Office which approved the early laws of apartheid. Dressed in linen and silk and stepping between the ranked race goers at the Penang Turf Club to steal moments with her man at the E & O, the Eastern and Oriental, she was a young woman to admire. The E & O. The hotel was built along Farquhar Street in Georgetown. Its ambience added to her charm. A bravery marked her, not seen as such because she was 'a slip of a thing' with over-reddened lips and she was obsessed by a passion for a particular man whose wealth answered the questions, Why him?, That Chinaman?

She chose the hats she wore to the races with care. They showed a respect for the local gossips. They were not only worn as an item to protect English skin from the tropical sun, nor merely to complement an outfit, but as an adornment he would recognise from the native persons' stand as distinctive, even beautiful on her, yet inconspicuous to everyone other than himself.

Her hats guided his eyes, her hats diverted him, binoculars apparently trained on a galloping horse he may have gambled a large sum of money on.

Imagine those afternoons at the Penang Turf Club! She'd arrive dressed in pale lemon linen or a fine sprigged voile edged with lace, a dress fastidiously cut to exaggerate her hips. She'd wear a large straw hat or a small one with a fine silk veil tipping the point of her nose. She'd clutch a cream bag in her cream gloved hand. Altogether the picture she was settled easily among the other women who gathered in the members' grandstand to watch the horses being led to their cages.

Those women moved languorously, carefully drawing their skirts with gloved hands to the backs of their thighs, gracefully sitting with their knees pressed together, chatting, exchanging exclamatory remarks behind gloved fingers feathering air near lips greased red.

Such a gesture may have been a signal to Li-tsieng. She may have laid a finger against her veiled cheek, or a shade of five extended the brim of her hat. Whichever, at a certain moment, Rose smiled slightly then edged past the prim knees of the other women to the exit.

Gestures and signals guaranteed to fascinate are not captured by photographers, but a clever one can suggest the style of the person by seeing the length of an eye in the lens, the weight of eyelids, the corners of lips when others want those lips to pout and those eyes to act sultry. Rose in her daily life wasn't cinematic although she may have informed the cinema thirty years after her death. She was a quick young woman hurrying toward Brook Road. She hailed a rickshaw, Here! Boy! A quiet voice, neither shrill nor broad, colonial nevertheless, To the E & O! She was practiced at giving orders.

A bell boy in Li-tsieng's pay arranged for her to slip through a side entrance of the hotel. Li-tsieng walked through the foyer, his family's wealth an assurance that he should not be questioned by a raised eyebrow or flabby lipped prejudice. For all one knows, the hotel staff understood they should be discreet to protect the many reputations involved, not least the hotel's itself.

Both Li-tsieng and Rose were not quite twenty-one when they began their affair.

When the rumours circulated, she was readily labelled 'a saucy wench', 'a naughty miss', and most certainly some of the women described her to their daughters as 'a disgrace to her family!'. Li-tsieng became known, on the strength of this one affair, as a 'ladies' man'. Before he was killed, the Europeans despised him as 'an Oriental with a sinful lust for our women', and respected him for his family's position within the Chinese business community of Georgetown. In truth, when he met Rose, he had a wife, a girl chosen for him on the day of his birth. Rose was a paramour. He loved her as if she was his only friend - according to one interpretation of their lives which presumed the better female part for the European woman in a triangle of colonial intrigue.

In a deep room, rather like the one Meredith, honeymooning with Fred Rogers, her husband slept in in 1972, the sound of sea lapping the wall of the esplanade, Rose and Li-tsieng held each others gaze.

He twirled a silver knobbed cane in one gloved hand and held the brim of his top hat between two fingers of the other gloved hand.

Rose walked round a rattan table. A vase of hibiscus shuddered slightly. Under the ceiling fan, Rose peeled off her gloves and lowered her hat. They were both enraptured by the game of love, narcissistically loving and symbolically swaying in each other's sense of drama.

Li-tsieng saw the light on her pale hair. He touched its fineness, his fingers amazed by its silkiness. She unbuttoned her dress. The straps of her Swiss cotton camisole slipped, and he caressed her shoulders with his lips, and she saw his face when she stepped out of her petticoat and unclipped her suspenders and slid her stockings down her legs, but she didn't slip off her french knickers. Rose backstepped to the double bed. In love making, too, she liked to seem elusive.

Pinched between the grubby fingers of a research student leafing through old documents which had miraculously survived the Second World War, Rose is an evocation of tropical indolence.

Gillian Hindmarsh, her manner efficient if not brusque, puts a photograph of a young woman aside and assiduously spends an afternoon reading and taking notes about the buildings of Penang.

She's writing a history about Malaysian architecture, assessing the colonial and the Saracen and the Chinese influences on the design of modern public buildings. The documents Gillian searches through are interleaved with newspaper clippings and building applications, the appended plans decipherable despite the silver fish tracks etched into draftsman's paper.

When she pauses to stretch her back and straighten her shoulders, massaging a small pain felt at the base of her neck, her gaze falls on the photograph. Gillian notes a slipper satin dress and assigns the soft faced young woman to an era when indulgence was a way of life for the European elite. Ideologically she knows the errors of the period when exploitation was a political persuasion few questioned and those who did were executed or locked away or despatched to insect ridden islands strung along the archipelago.

Gillian lifts the photograph and examines it closely. The young woman looks over one shoulder at the viewer, her mouth opens one tooth sparkles. The dress, its spaghetti straps criss-crossing her back, looks so dangerously insecure. Her short cropped hair is crimped into waves pressed around her forehead. Not a remarkable photograph of a woman who could afford to wear the dress to match the hairstyle a designer in Paris or London decreed was correct.

Gillian slips the photograph in her bag, a souvenir of her researching in the dusty offices of the Dewan Sri Pinang. It's so like many photographs of the period she's looked at she fails to see the significance in the way the parted lips rise up a little on one side and the corners of the eyes lengthen towards the eye of the lens. For when this portrait was taken Rose was in love with her own voluptuousness.

If there had been no war, she may have become a tedious woman boasting in her old age about her supremacy over other women in the game of love. Li-tsieng may have become one among many, 'a significant beginning'. She may have told stories about Li-tsieng remembering her birthday every year until he died, and more fantastic fictions to prove her charm greater than that of other women. If Rose was a victim of her time and place in history it was in a way which made her extraordinary rather than pitiable. For when these two were twenty-one, the Japanese bombed and cycled their way down the archipelago blasting forever the opulence of an Empire.

Li-tsieng and Rose chose to die.

Stories circulate among the fishermen who ply the waters around Penang Island and among the Malay kampong dwellers. They tell of a ghostly music which wafts through the night of the anniversary of the bombing of Georgetown.

Li-tsieng, his unknown face gazing on Rose when the portrait was photographed, left no image for his family to place in front of a jar of ashes. Unsettled by the quality of his faithlessness, his wife didn't mourn his death. His family accepted tacitly he had placed rash love before familial duty. They allowed his soul to pass without ceremony from this world where it should reincarnate as a dog, punishment justly deserved for his feckless behaviour.

Only his mother mourned him. She kept in a silk covered book the portrait of an elegant young man dressed in a pin-striped suit, a yellow rosebud pinned to

his buttonhole. A top hat and a walking cane overlapped his gloved hands. Before she died, the old grandmother showed it to the son her son hadn't known his wife carried within her to Chile. Wang Shi-zheng went back to Penang during the late years of the 1950's to assist several uncles rebuild and expand the Wang family investments.

Gillian, researching her Phd in 1982, knows none of these things.

She packs away her note books and runs her hands through her hair. Dust roughens the back of her throat and scratches her eyes. It coats her fingertips and makes her sneeze.

Gillian slips out of the bunker where the library stores its archives. She's fully satisfied with her investigations into the size and number of plans for elaborate private dwellings none of which, she believes, could ever have been built.

A library assistant beams goodwill and she hurries past, afraid her weak smile is insufficient thanks for his help in finding her a good desk and chair and a working lamp. She checks her wrist watch more from habit than need and she busies her lips and nods and vanishes in a tumultuous whirl. She hopes she manages to conceal her impatience with the thought of having to stop for an inconsequential chat with a library assistant.

Gillian hurries to the Cold Store. She orders an ice-cream and waits for a new acquaintance, a dredging engineer called Patrick. The Straits had been silting and the supplies of fish, it was being said, were less than they should be.

Giving a spare thought to the changing pace of life on Penang Island Gillian writes a few inspirational notes for her thesis. She's drawn into herself, to that place where expectation and how-it-is lean on the new reality of simple paradigms. Her speculation on the historical period 1910-1940, on a delusory way of life, increased in her a sense of bitter longing for a neurotic romance she couldn't name. Perhaps she hasn't the time to hear it.

In the frame of her real world, a young man with hair swept high like a cockatoo's crest stares happily above an ice cream melting over his hand. He smiles at the waiter who lifts the soggy cone from the young man's hand to prop it in a plastic holder. The young man stands unsteadily. He sways out of the room. After a few minutes he reappears to drag his chair out and sit again in front of his cone. He lifts it, licks it once, and resumes his contemplation of bliss above the melting ice cream.

The waiter, a lean man resembling the library assistant, whispers to Gillian, Opium! He is terribly sick! But, if you do not mind, we let him stay.

Gillian is pleasantly gratified by the waiter's admission. And she is shocked by a wave of guilt about her neglect of the library assistant. She notes in her diary that she should buy the library assistant a gift of thanks - and she hates her tawdry desire to pay for his favour rather than share a moment's conviviality with him.

Time, after all is said and done, is money.

Gillian discusses none of these things with Patrick when he sits sweatily beside her. Patrick Dreher is much younger than she is, twenty-five to her thirty-five. Busily she pushes the photograph of a young woman dressed in an evening gown across the table for him to see. He holds the portrait up to the light to examine it. Gillian breathily informs him of the plans for a strange house. A mansion, would you believe? With a submarine dining hall? Don't expect it was ever built, she adds, plucking the sepia portrait from his gray fingers, Someone dreamt it, I guess. After reading Jules Verne. And she brushes Patrick's fingers with her fingertips and she gazes through a fringe of eyelashes at him, and the man with the cockatoo's yellow crest hairstyle smiles ecstatically over his sticky hand.

Overlapped by documentary evidence and underlapped by visual and musical impressions, dreams lose in significance and gain in detail garnered from the movies. Somewhere a camera records the tender ministrations between a couple. Her head turns, her lips move, his hand covers hers, his chin thrusts above an unfinished drink, and we believe we have comprehended the mannerisms of an era like and unlike our own. When the script writer's words are uttered by the actors, and the sound recordist and the cinematographer capture an emblematic image, achetypes solidify, an era is stereotyped.

That day when at work in the library Gillian had struggled to read the faded and eaten characters of an article about a large Chinese family. Accompanying the article was a photograph of several elaborately gowned women and children seated around one elderly man. In turn, they were circled by a number of young and middle-aged men dressed in European suits suggesting the family belonged to the Chinese elite of Penang. The newspaper was dated December 2, 1941.

She studied the line of seamless faces, the strange silk clothes enveloping small but plump bodies, the dotted black eyes. The photograph of the clan seated around the oldest man and his first wife seemed to be announcing their imminent departure, either from the world or from Georgetown itself. She guessed the family, or clan, had been forewarned to fear the speed and ferocity of the Japanese military descending the longitudes from Manchuria to Australia.

She enjoyed the implications of the photograph, the statement by the clan and the individuals within it, even the elegant young man listed in the caption as Li-tsieng, back row, second from the left, that they were officially gone, not there in Georgetown. They gave themselves the possibility of surfacing on another shore to begin life again. Their lips sealed by the photographer's disclaimer, they may have slipped into the narrow lanes of Georgetown among the more ordinary Chinese whose shops opened onto Jalan Chulia. Would they have stayed to test the winds of fate?

Gillian admits over ice cream that when she sees the old British residences of Georgetown, The ones deep under trees?, she hears a silence scratching underneath a saxophone's wailing. You know. The sound of old gramophone records rotating under the weight of the needle arm.

Gillian's spoonful of ice cream follows her memory of the photographed family and her classification of the young woman whose portrait she'd tucked in her bag. Patrick, lounging, fingers in the change pocket of his jeans, head at an engaging angle, gazes at her far away gazing at photographs, pictures, movies, Seeing! Watching! Extending memories! Artistically! But how do we *really* know!

In the dusty archives, leafing through the newspaper, she had wondered if ordinary Chinese people had been safer in 1942 than the less than ordinary Chinese. Soldiers drawn from the feudal villages of Japan, bombs and incendiary devices cared little for the social distinctions practised rigorously by a colonial society on an island. Gillian had no way of knowing the Wangs were destined to consolidate their subsidiary businesses in Chile.

Nor did she know Li-tsieng sailed back to Penang to die with the young woman whose photographed portrait she'd found. She'd not yet discovered whether the glass dining hall was built. Its fate was unknown to all but those servants who had watched the bomb drop and the waters churn as they clapped their hands to their mouths and ears to muffle their cries and to lessen the roar

of the water crashing into the dining hall where the young master danced with Rose, his paramour.

When the Japanese declared themselves the government of Penang, those servants for reasons they may have considered irrelevant, were wired together, neck to neck, rowed past the broken glass walls of the dining hall, and they were tossed overboard. They choked and drowned, their wide eyes and squared mouths moaning the silent agony of their murders.

One young Japanese soldier who helped push them to their deaths, dulled from the drudgery of routine killing, long marches and sleepless nights, was startled to see floating under his oar the face of a European woman. Not wanting to attract the derisive wit of his sergeant, he cooled his shock and poked his oar at the face.

Her parted lips seemed to smile. Her short hair fanned a little, her skirt ballooned slowly. She didn't bob ungainly and roll over from the force of his striking oar. Alarmed by continuous bloodiness, he wanted to expunge the silly smile.

His soul darkened.

He shove at her face again.

But, like the ghostly woman yearning for her loved one who walked in a storm through the snow capped mountains near his village, this woman of the tropics smiled and her arms seemed to beckon him into her embrace.

The young soldier, bellowing fear, stood up. His astonished comrades shouted. With a cry to his mother for her forgiveness, he flung his arms skyward and he plunged into the water. He struck his head on jagged glass. As he drowned, his blood, streaming like a ribbon, trailed his compatriots to shore.

Only the fish know this.

A saxophone's lowering note fails to interrupt Gillian's fascination with Patrick. She is too distracted by erotic promise to sense a breathing nuzzling her earlobe. Stroking fingertips, she kindles warmth to extinguish her terror of love's pain. Patrick's self-satisfied body unravels. He stands and thrusts his hands into his pockets and looks away. Breathlessly, she bounces at his elbow, adoration freezing the luck to know love.

It is for a fisherman to stare in fright across rippling water at a shimmering whiteness gliding as if dancing to a music haunting the facade of the old E & O. The waters heave. His boat rocks. The space occupied by a wing of decaying rooms blackens, presaging no peace of mind.

The fisherman's body trembles. With foreboding, he begins to pull in his net and his horrid eye sees a woman's arm pitch under restless waters. A body wallows, a skirt undulates. A lipless face smiles at him.

When he chants the words of exorcism above the fisherman, the village bomoh denounces a female spirit for enchanting schools of fish to swim with her to another world, and Gillian dreams she greets the woman in the slipper satin gown. She tries to be affable, but the woman looks through her as if she is nothing. Gillian looks over her shoulder to see what might be of greater portent than herself. Black edged with red and a reddening black race towards them. The woman covers her face and sinks. Gillian points her elbow above her head and spans her hands over her face. She wakes up to hear her big scream squeak at the back of her throat. Patrick mumbles, 'T's okay-okay'. She slides along the length of his back, her cheek rests between his shoulder blades, and once again Gillian catches sight of the dreamt one leaning over black wateriness, casting shadowy doubt on the character a young woman may become in a history written for constant replay, a drama presented in fancy dress masquerading as a life once lived.

ON RESEARCHING PENANG

When I first visited Penang, I stayed at the E & O. For me, I saw an era lit up in a fraction of a second. There was the history of the days before the outbreak of World War II, those days my mother talked about. There was the dust settled over the scenes remembered from Somerset Maugham - not his stories so much as the cinema renditions of those stories.

This was in 1970. I was a too young married woman, very impressionable, and I had not travelled far from my rural origins situated in the beautiful hills behind the most easterly point of Australia, Byron Bay.

Let me digress to explain Byron Bay. It is part of Australia, known to the tourist industry as Summerland, which is semi-tropical, once covered by a dense rainforest. The land was cleared for dairy farms in the late nineteenth century. As ruthlessly, the Bundjulong people, kooris, were removed. My

mother's people were among those early farmers. My father's people followed later, in the 1910's, into the towns as business people and as civil servants. Grandfather was in fact number one in the Byron Bay telephone book. The land in this area is unusual for Australia. Some valleys undulate, others are rugged. You don't suffer an endless series of gum trees in this region. A lot of the vegetation is similar if not the same as the vegetation you have in Malaysia. Byron Bay itself is wide and deep. It faces north which makes it safe. The dunes used to roll about one or two kilometers inland. Its many beaches were my playground when I was a child. When I completed high school I left the district for the city and further education.

Sydney was a first big change for me. Later Singapore surprised me and Djakarta assaulted my senses. In fact, in 1970, Djakarta rendered me speechless. The culture shock was extreme. Penang, after Djakarta, was somehow familiar. It was restful and, although nothing like home, redolent of home.

The wing of the E & O we stayed in no longer exists. The bar is much as it always has been, but it is no longer possible to sit in the small breakfast room, breezes drifting through the lace draped over the French doors opening onto the hibiscus garden. Along the five footway of the streets in the immediate vicinity, Sikh men no longer unroll string mattresses to sleep through the early afternoon hours before reopening business houses. Penang, and the E & O with it, has changed.

Byron Bay has too. From being a very sleepy hollow in the 1950's, it became a surf board riding mecca in the 60's, then a hippie's discovery in the 70's. They were followed by the young professionals seeking to get away from the city for a better family life in the 80's. Residents are now arguing about the desirability of Club Med or no.

For me, Penang and Byron Bay, are points of reference. With these two changing hubs of my universe in mind, I indulge imagination. They describe the arc of my nation which is not a governmental but a mental state.

Back then in 1970 when I first found Penang, I walked through streets with images of Dorothy Lamour singing enchanted love in equally enchanted tropical locations. A tumultuous cascading of associative memories recalled fairy stories, old geography books, the entire set of Arthur Mee's children's encyclopedia, loads of books written in the travel and description genre. I was well schooled in Britishness, you see, and the old empire mapped the bookshelf as surely as it did its literal political sphere of influence. The

streets, you might say, the very streets of Penang had been paved by a certain Britishness I recognised from those books instructing in a bewitching, some would say charming, way how great was an empire.

Not that I would wish to appropriate something as distinctive as Penang's streets as Australian in the dubious exercise of making Australia Asian. In fact, in reality, Penang's streets belong to the political entity, Malaysia, and they are undeniably Chinese with Indian and Arabic influences. In 1970 Penang became a part of my overall experiences. It endured as a mobile text in the field of imagined territory juxtaposed with the real thing. It is this experience of memory, from the picture book to the real thing, from an image to the tactile experience of the remembered image, which informs my fiction.

Twenty years later, I wrote the preceding short story, *fish lips*, a chapter of a work-in-progress by the same name. After I reread it, I could see the magic I recalled of the Penang of 1970. It's a romance, perhaps an unlikely one, between a Chinese man and an English woman. Both are very young. Some Chinese women, I must inform you, have questioned my choice of a Chinese man as a lover. They insist he should be a Malay, I counter their adamant argument with the thought that it is time for a Chinese man to be entered into the annals of romantic fiction. As a lover.

When I finished *fish lips*, I realised how many assumptions I had made. What followed was a scurry through libraries and one of the most difficult details I had to pursue was the seating arrangement at the Penang Turf Club before the outbreak of hostilities in 1941. The trail was as follows.

Being genderist is occasionally important in Australia. So, acting soundly from an ideological perspective, I believed the unpublished memoirs by women would be a sensitive source heavy on detail. I cannot expound much on the writer of the only one I found because I believe she is alive still to this day. However, her memoir, in the National Library of Australia, of the wife of a planter on a Ladang Geddes estate near the Bahau village in Negeri Sembilan from 1938 until February 1941 proved useless. She evinced a great love for her sewing machine. I couldn't do a lot with a sewing machine in a grand tropical passion.

Finding anything about Penang was hard slog. In Australian libraries, there are written records about the Penang of last century, the Japanese occupation of Singapore and later documents about Kuala Lumpur, but not much at all about Penang. Penang is fragmented into texts as a chapter, a paragraph or two, rarely as a whole piece. It usually is recalled many years after being

visited or lived in. Frustrated by the lack of factual detail, I dipped into the Singapore and Kuala Lumpur files, sometimes finding there exactly what I was after.

I found a gem in Grenfell Ruddock. A *Malayan diary* compiled from a field diary and letters, transcribed in 1963 by Grenfell Ruddock about the three months of October to December 1955 he spent in Kuala Lumpur as United Nations advisor for town planning and traffic control, is in the manuscript section of the archives at the National Library of Australia. He was a most observant and warm hearted diarist. In his diary, I found a copy of a supplement extracted from *The Malay Mail*. *50 years of progress* is a piece of Sunday journalism capitalising on nostalgia, revealing the secret of the seating arrangements at Turf Clubs in the FMS and the province of Wellesley before World War II.

One remarkable document I found in the Dixon Collection, State Library of NSW, was an article published in the *Natal Daily News*, April 1942. Mrs Elwin Hughes, a British businessman's wife, kept a diary of events and reflections on her life in Kuala Lumpur from Nov. 22 1941 - Feb. 5 1942. The couple had lived in KL most of their lives, their children had returned from the long years of separation in England and it seemed that the best in life was to come. She gave me a sense of the delusive calm before the nightmare better than any novelist I have read on the Japanese invasion. She also described an evening round about December 9, 1941, when a school mistress friend appeared from Penang, disheveled, pallid and mute with fear. With greater passion, Elwin Hughes' account described both the public and the private considerations of an adult who feared to believe the inevitable - how she grasped hope to save lives and to remain among the living herself. I recommend this document to anyone with a specific interest in all accounts of this period.

I consulted *The Straits Times* mimeographed holding at Fisher Library, Sydney University. In Singapore, I pursued more journalistic sources. Holdings were consulted at the library of the National University Singapore with a varying degree of success. The most informative were:-

Straits Time Annual 1937, 1938, 1939

British Malaya 1941

Penang: Past and Present 1863-1963: An historical account of the City of Georgetown since 1786. This is a particularly interesting straightforward

history of the town as the municipal fathers saw it. One of those valuable surprises.

Sunday Times 1945-1965

A memoir by the late twenties editor of the Straits Echo, George Bilankin, *Hail Penang*, - 1932, was as good as it was disappointing. Bilaikin was a workaholic, and as an observer, he wasn't a good enough gossip, possibly disdainful or even unaware of a lot of the nonsensical side of social intercourse. The odd little insight made reading his book worthwhile. A good sense of place he doesn't exploit quite enough to make it really live.

And I found even more travel and description published round about the thirties in the National Library of Singapore.

But what about the *peranakan* side of the romance? That was difficult. I relied at first on Queenie Chang's *Memoirs of a Nyonya*. I found it fascinating but not enough. To allow my senses to invade a *peranakan* household, I needed more detail, less careful authorial distancing. Thank goodness, I found it. Penang's Yeap Joo Kim, author of a pamphlet, *The patriarch and the pot-boiler, of comb, powder and rouge* gave me the *peranakan* details I wanted. She may be no Proust or Lao Tzu, the profundities may not be present, but she has a good eye for detail and a good nose, too. Yeap's a writer like my mother is a talker. No detail is considered unworthy of comment. If only the planter's wife could have looked up from her sewing machine to describe the kitchen habits, the vegetables, the cakes, the clothes, powders, hairstyles, textures of skin, sounds of voices the way Yeap has done for Penang.

I read as many novels and memoirs and biographies about *towkays* and the like I could lay my hands on. The family politics differ from the clannish and monogamous structure I began my life in, you see. I had to understand a new way of looking at loyalties, obligations, and emphases. Among others, Yeap's melodramatic interpretations were good for those dynamics, too.

I waylaid young men in the National University of Singapore, and I questioned the poet, Robert Yeo, in a discursive interview, because I wanted some information about adaptation when moving from place to place around the world. The people I know who have a Chinese background tend to be from families that travel. I wanted to sense the identity they might feel which I thought might differ from my own which is rooted in soil - hear how they

believe they accommodate themselves to overseas places, and how and when they felt met halfway or not at all.

At this point let me not forget to mention the *Penang Information Guide*, 1936 which Professor Cheah Boon Kheng kindly sent me. And Dr. Paul Kratoska's *Penang Guidebook*. Both these books have never been far from my elbow when I was writing the Penang chapters.

One of the most difficult questions to put to someone who writes a novel is What is it about? The writer has spent a whole novel, in this case over 120,000 words, saying what it is about. As I mentioned earlier, I write from the experience of memory complete with imagined distortions. Thus far, my novel covers a broad canvas. It may be about love and forgiveness. The fragility of goodness. Filtered throughout are ideas about women in history, their course charted from a desire for piety in the 1920's to rationalize the hardships endured by terrible aloneness with loneliness in a newly settled part of Australia, to the cinematic romances of the 30s and 40s, to the slow stirring of another movement in the 50s and 60s, the materialistic feminism of the 70s and 80s, the pragmatism of the 90s to a renewed interest in the sacred in the first decade of next century. The one *peranakan* woman I look at closely is a writer. I made her easy for me.

Nor have I neglected men. My male characters are not unsympathetic. I would have to say all of them are sensitive. Some suffer future shock, some are caring family men, some are tough survivors and one is quite mad. There are moments when they are lovers, and one who is always a lover, and another who will probably become a lover. There is one chaste male.

Research methods (I have worked for a scheme to train librarians to set up electronic library systems), inspirations, divine revelations, the impact of the micro-dot, family life, nostalgia, globalism and money are all etched into the telling. Perhaps staying a few months in Singapore led me to money. Money, in itself valueless, makes possible matters of great value. The search precipitated by the liberty money buys may well be first for artwork then for the sacred. (We shall see how Singapore develops.)

Yet it remained that when I sat back after not quite completing the first draft of this work I tentatively call *fish lips*, I saw how much the writing had been an exploration of my love affair with Penang and Byron Bay and my fear for their futures. For I am writing a regional romance encompassing a love, which, snapped short by a bomb, takes another fifty years to resolve itself.

My novel may be about the experience of memory, historical and future memory. It is about how history is perceived even as it is being made, how the visual media effects ways of perceiving historical time and how it informs expectations of the future. And in my schema the imagined future then becomes part of the experience of memory.

But! Christiana Stead advised an authorial description of one's own novel should fit on the back of a postage stamp. In that case, *fish lips* may best be described as wedding! My hope is that the telling of romances such as this one about an English Rose and a dashing Wang Li-tsieng gives us pause to reflect, perhaps to gentle us when our humanity is threatened.