



## Region's tales should be brought to book

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Perhaps the tsunami will turn local authors' minds to fresh ground, writes Susan Wyndham.

After the tsunami hit, the *Herald's* editors began a search for "big-name" Australian writers who had written books set in Indonesia, Thailand or Sri Lanka and might write a knowledgeable piece for the newspaper. Confidently, I set out to make a list.

First to mind was Christopher Koch's international bestseller, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, followed by Blanche d'Alpuget's novel, *Monkeys in the Dark*, both set in Indonesia in the 1960s. But both are more than 25 years old and their authors long disconnected from Indonesia.

Several writers - Alex Miller, Nicholas Jose, Linda Jaivin, Simon Leys, for example - have focused on China. Shirley Hazzard's 2004 Miles Franklin Award winner, *The Great Fire*, was set in Hong Kong and Japan. Peter Carey placed part of his 2004 novel, *My Life as a Fake*, in Malaysia, but all his other stories take place in Australia, Britain, Europe and America, as do most books by Tom Keneally, David Malouf, Tim Winton, Helen Garner, Rodney Hall and other prominent authors.

My list petered out. It was surprising to realise that despite the number of Australians travelling to the south Asian or Indian Ocean nations, those places are almost absent from our literature. Our writers, uninterested or uncomprehending, have skipped over the region to more familiar imaginative ground. Readers turning to books for an understanding of the devastated countries will have to look elsewhere.

There's no shortage of international fiction from cross-cultural writers - the Asian diaspora comfortable with the English language and Western storytelling. A steady flow of Indian novels finds an easy market here. Michael Ondaatje has written from Canada about his native Sri Lanka. *The Life of Pi*, the bestselling 2002 Booker Prize winner by Yann Martel, a Spanish-Canadian, uncannily foreshadowed this month's reports of survivors floating across the Indian Ocean on flimsy rafts.

And a young Thai-American, Rattawut Lapcharoensap, is about to make waves with his first collection of stories, *Sightseeing*.

Look beyond the well-known writers and a similar literature is starting to emerge from Asian immigrants to Australia and their children. Yasmine Gooneratne, Chandani Lokuge and Michelle de Kretser have all written novels set in their birth country, Sri Lanka - "a small island riding an ocean and nothing to break the fall" in *The Hamilton Case*, de Kretser's prize-winning 2003 novel. Lokuge's *Turtle Nest* (2003) is set on the stretch of beach washed away by the tsunami, and she was there with the turtle farmers last month. Her book is already a historical account "of the peaceful times of one year before".

Sophie Cunningham, a Caucasian Australian interested in "where East meets West", imbued her first novel, *Geography*, with her love of Sri Lanka and India. If it is physically possible, she will return to southern Sri Lanka in April on an Asialink residency.

Asialink may be the great hope for a broader Asian-Australian literature. Based at the University of Melbourne, with funding from the Myer Foundation, the Asialink Centre has sent 69 writers to 11 countries since 1997, insisting they stay three or four months and have more than a tourist's perspective. India, Japan and Vietnam have been the most popular destinations so far.

Although novels with foreign settings have been excluded from the Miles Franklin Award, the concept of what is "Australian" is expanding. Since 1996 there has also been the encouragement of the Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize, based in San Francisco and aimed at "promoting greater understanding and co-operation among the peoples and nations of the Pacific Rim and south Asia".

As one would expect, Australia's entries are mostly about Australia. Last year 39 were about Australia, four each about Japan, the Pacific Islands and south Asia, two about New Zealand and one each about China, North Korea, Papua New Guinea, Thailand and Vietnam.

When it comes to "non-fiction", the terrible truth is that *Phaic Tan: Sunstroke on a Shoestring* by Santo Cilauro, Tom Gleisner and Rob Sitch was the most sought-after source of knowledge about Asia in the past year (80,000 sold since November). The book is a brilliant, satirical guide to a generic Asian country plagued by natural disaster, political instability and tourism. Now it looks less funny. Otherwise, the market is full of real travel guides and travellers' adventures, such as *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts.

More serious books haven't a hope of matching *Phaic Tan's* success. An author I know is trying to find an Australian publisher for his authoritative political history of a South-East Asian country but the replies have been consistent. Patrick Gallagher, the managing director of Allen & Unwin, wrote: "We have been increasingly depressed by our failure to make much headway with our longstanding efforts to publish books on and into Asia, and we are now taking on very few books indeed in that area."

Allen & Unwin's academic publisher, Elizabeth Weiss, confirms that it has been harder to publish on Asian issues since the region became less central to Australian foreign policy and education in the past decade. Also, she says, "There's been a massive shift in interest to the Middle East. We can only pay attention to so many places at once."

Perhaps, perversely, the tsunami will help drag our attention to another neglected region.

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