

Book Review of Feroz Faisal Dawson's *Ladder in the Water and Other Stories* (2012)

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Feroz Faisal Dawson, *Ladder in the Water and Other Stories* (Fiction)

Kuala Lumpur: The Actors Studio Sdn Bhd (Malaysia), 2012. Pp. 146. ISBN 978-967-11344-0-5 (Paperback). Price: RM 25.

Ladder in the Water and Other Stories by Feroz Faisal Dawson (1966-2012) was published in 2012 but the event seems to have escaped the public eye. I only knew about it and got the book in December 2019, when I learned that it has not been reviewed by any significant publication. This review is a tribute to a dear friend, whose writing I greatly admire.

Feroz was a remarkably fine writer whose stories show an understanding and command of the art and craft of storytelling, boldness in experimenting with form and style, and an enviable sensitivity to both written and spoken language.

The 9 stories in *Ladder in the Water* are mostly drawn from his personal experiences in Malaysia where he was born and grew up, and in the US where he studied Film. Regardless of the setting, they're always told from a Malaysian viewpoint and in a conversational — often colloquial — style that is quite delightful. His extraordinary ways of telling stories are best appreciated through careful reading of not only the stories but also how they are told.

“Fill in the Blanks”, for example, is a strangely told story. It is a list of news briefs about violence and violent death around the world. Thrown into this grim catalogue are the narrator's observations of a shabby, solitary man frequently seen walking around with a plastic bag, seemingly unhinged, and striking fear into the hearts of children. No narrative connects all these events into a single story. Instead, the title commands us to make our own connections; find, perhaps, the story in our own hearts. None of his other stories are this enigmatic, but they all have this koan-like quality of provoking thought, of not simply providing answers.

For some writers the stories needing to be told are so complex, so entangled in the larger, ever-evolving and never-ending story of real-world realities, that telling them in the conventional way

— with simple storylines, clever little twists, and clear-cut endings — is a kind of lying. I daresay Feroz was such a writer. His stories tend to be multi-layered, the narrative moving constantly and seamlessly through multiple times and places.

A typical example is “A Drop of Silver”. It’s about how, in 1990, the narrator and his buddy take a midnight drive along Jalan University and Jalan Gasing (in Petaling Jaya) for the sole purpose of hacking down the ruling party’s pre-election banners and posters. The landmarks they drive past trigger off floods of memories, and the narrative loops back and forth between past and present, treating us to a series of amusingly told anecdotes that reveal the multifaceted quirks and warts of Malaysian society. The anecdotes may seem random, but on closer reading are found to be connected to what they were doing that night, to what they did with their lives later, to why the story was ever written and, indeed, to this moment of your reading this review. Yes, gentle reader, the story is ultimately about us.

It is said that great writers hold up a mirror to the society of which they write. The society Feroz writes about is primarily that of Malaysians like him: born in the mid-1960s to English-educated and English-speaking parents, urban-based, middle-to-upper middle class, schooled primarily in Malay but preferring English, attended university abroad. In short, today’s elite — with whom Feroz’ story subjects would surely strike a chord.

In the Malaysia-based stories: politically-motivated vandalism (“A Drop of Silver”), religious extremism (“No One Has Claimed Responsibility”), funerals attended out of a sense of duty (“Fireworks”), and New Year’s Eve celebrations (“Ladder in the Water”). In the US-based stories: complaint about a library attendant (“In a County Library”), getting married (“The Licence”), and attending a college football game (“The Wind Chill Factor”). There’s even a story for literature aficionados (“This Bar is Called Heaven”).

I cannot close this review without singling out the title story, “Ladder in the Water”, for special mention. A mature work, it is structured like a Classic French play and cinematic in effect. The action is limited to a beach resort in Penang in the hours from sunset to midnight on New Year’s Eve 1993. The third-person narrator moves like a camera between a 28th-floor apartment and the beach below, impassively recording the goings-on: in the apartment the emotion-filled silences of two lovers about to break up; on the beach the empty chatter of their friends waiting for the New Year. It’s a must-read.

Buy *Ladder in the Water*! Even if you don't want to read the stories, buy it. And keep it safe. One day, one of your literature-loving descendants will thank you for it.

Editor's note: Readers who wish to purchase a copy of the book should contact Faridah Merican:
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