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Rex Shelley (1930 -)

Peter Wicks, University of Southern Queensland

Novelist, retired engineer and civil servant
Active 1991 - in Singapore, Southeast Asia

One of the significant human consequences of Western colonialism in Southeast Asia was the development of intimate relationships between European men and local women, and the subsequent creation over time of a small, but tenacious and vibrant Eurasian community. In the city-state of Singapore, the Eurasians are known by colloquial names such as **mestico**, **serani**, and **geragok**. Rex Shelley is a distinguished and articulate member of this hardy band.

Shelley was born in neighbouring Malaysia in 1930 of English, Portuguese, Malay and Buginese descent. His father was a shipyard worker; his mother a schoolteacher. He attended St Anthony's Catholic School in Singapore before the Pacific War, and then a Japanese language school for a year during the wartime Occupation. Shelley's first employment was as a carpenter's apprentice in a shipyard. After the Pacific War, he attended Raffles College, where he studied Chemistry on a scholarship, and then went to Britain to study Engineering, where he briefly became involved in leftist student politics. After graduation from Cambridge University, he returned to Singapore and established a company that imported engineering equipment. He then worked for many years as a civil servant, and achieved senior positions in the Public Service and Education Service Commissions. In retirement, he continued to operate a trading business, and began serious creative writing in his sixties, publishing his first novel at the age of 61. His other enthusiasms are reading, swimming, music, and fabric-painting... Shelley identifies the dominant literary influences upon himself as Charles Dickens, John Steinbeck, and Joseph Conrad.

In Shelley's substantial body of fiction, the dominant Eurasian characters form an engaging, multi-dimensional community. They are active, patriotic participants in the growth of

Singapore. They are not marginal, post-colonial oddities. but people conscious of their historical distinctiveness and contemporary promise. The Prologue to Shelley's first novel; *The Shrimp People* (1991) delineates the birth of the Eurasian in regional history after a Portuguese sailor cohabits with a Malay woman on the beaches of Malacca, somewhere in the mists of time. The pages which follows are peppered with a veritable kaleidoscope of names such as Machado, Gonzales, Cornelius, Pereira, Pinto, Essendon, Kraal, Oliveira, Beer, Dalian, and Wester out., not one of them a surname from Singapore's majority Chinese population. The text of *The Shrimp People* focuses on the activities of the Rodrigues family, notably James the dutiful father and inspector of police, and his daughter Bertha, vivacious, talented, a sportswoman incongruously turned spy for Indonesia during the period of Confrontation...

Three other novels appeared in quick succession: *People of the Pear Tree* (1993) with the Perera family caught up in the Japanese Occupation, *Island in the Centre* (1995), where Japanese and Eurasians intermingle in Singapore during the 1930s, and *River of Roses* (1998), which explores four generations of the extended Rosario family, from British colonialism to independent Singapore. Stylistically, Shelley's novels are episodic rather than linear in structure, and he makes extensive use of flashbacks and some bizarre twist of plot. Yet the corpus of Shelley's fiction gives Eurasians in maritime Southeast Asia historical depth and even a kind of epic grandeur. One passage in *People of the Pear Tree* is especially poignant and lyrical.as the Perera family attends Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at the small, wooden Catholic Church in Bahau, filling the building with their singing of *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. They then go on to a New Year's Eve party, where everyone drank **samsu**, the potent brew fomented from coconut juice, and greeted 1945 with a hearty rendition of *There'll Always be an England*, whilst a Japanese military presence continues to menace the landscape outside.

FICTIONAL WORKS BY REX SHELLEY

The Shrimp People. Singapore: Times Books International, 1991.

People of the Pear Tree. Singapore: times Books International, 1993.

Island in the Centre. Singapore: Times Books International, 1995.

River of Roses. Singapore: Times Books international, 1998.