



SINGAPORE

CHARLIE CHAPLIN

FLINGS

ANTHONY BURGESS

JOSEPH CONRAD

LITERARY

STOPOVERS

ANTON CHEKHOV

FROM CHEKHOV

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

TO TAGORE

ISABELLA BIRD

IRA NADEL

## **Advance Praise for *Singapore Flings***

“Lively tales about a cavalcade of celebrity writers who have passed through or stayed in Singapore long enough to record their reflections. But also a valuable cultural history. Ira Nadel is an expert biographer and a masterful storyteller. Full of intoxicating affection for the Lion City, but always mindful and respectful of the tensions that result when Western myths and stereotypes about Singapore, and wider Asia, meet uncomfortable local realities in a contested space. A fascinating and well-documented literary tour. Nadel views Singapore as ‘a gateway, a beginning, a point of origin’ for the literary imagination.”

**—Professor Michael Earley, Former Dean, Faculty of  
Performing Arts, LASALLE College of the Arts**

“Film stars and journalists, botanists and spies—*Singapore Flings* gathers in one place an impressively eclectic cast of the city’s literary visitors. Ira Nadel narrates these journeys with a learned ease, documenting memorable moments and personal discoveries alongside these travellers’ peculiar foibles and fumbles. *Singapore Flings* bears witness to the city’s persistent and often misunderstood attraction to outsiders, while recalling how trips to this singular place can lead to onward connections in the authors’ imaginations. These literary travellers trade in some of the superficial impressions that such brief exposures entail, and yet they occasionally stumble on that flash of revelation that is only possible from an outsider’s oblique point of view. Peppered with historical curiosities and insights, *Singapore Flings* itself makes for lively travel reading, whether the reader remains at home or away—with or without the requisite gin sling in hand.”

**—Kevin Riordan, Assistant Professor at  
Nanyang Technological University**

Copyright © 2023 by Ira Nadel  
Cover design and illustrations by Sophia Tan

Published in Singapore by Epigram Books.  
[www.epigram.sg](http://www.epigram.sg)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher.

**National Library Board, Singapore**  
**Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

Name: Nadel, Ira Bruce.  
Title: Singapore flings: literary stopovers from Chekhov to Tagore / Ira Nadel.  
Description: First edition. | Singapore : Epigram Books, 2023.  
Identifier: ISBN 978-981-49-8483-6 (paperback) | ISBN 978-981-49-8484-3 (ebook)  
Subject: LCSH: Authors—Travel—Singapore. | Singapore—Description and travel. | Singapore—History—20th century.  
Classification: DDC 915.957—dc23

First edition, February 2023.



**E**  
EPIGRAM

For Gideon, Levi and Coby

# CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 – Isabella Bird: Her Course of Flight	26
Chapter 2 – Pierre Boulle: Singapore Spy	38
Chapter 3 – Anthony Burgess: In the King’s Pavilion	50
Chapter 4 – Charlie Chaplin: A Comic Eyes the Orient	64
Chapter 5 – Anton Chekhov: From Siberia to Singapore	76
Chapter 6 – Jean Cocteau: Singapore’s Opium Mists	86
Chapter 7 – Joseph Conrad: The Great Highway of the East	94
Chapter 8 – Noël Coward: Acting Up, Acting Out	102
Chapter 9 – J. G. Farrell: The Empire Strikes Back	113
Chapter 10 – Martha Gellhorn: Last Seat to Singapore	125
Chapter 11 – Hermann Hesse: Asian Dreams	135
Chapter 12 – Rudyard Kipling: Orchids and Tin	145
Chapter 13 – Bruce Lockhart: Planter, Diplomat, Spy	156
Chapter 14 – André Malraux: “Asia...my destiny”	165
Chapter 15 – Somerset Maugham: The View from Raffles	179
Chapter 16 – Jan Morris: The Writer as Traveller	195
Chapter 17 – Pablo Neruda: Mystery and “The fabulous Orient”	206
Chapter 18 – Tom Stoppard: Singapore Escape	221
Chapter 19 – Rabindranath Tagore: Harmony in the East	231
Chapter 20 – Paul Theroux: The Witness as Writer	241
Chapter 21 – Alec Waugh: Colonial Romantic	256
Acknowledgements	266
About the Author	267
Bibliography	268

# INTRODUCTION

*And this is how I see the East...a bay, a wide bay, smooth as glass and polished like ice, shimmering in the dark...and suddenly a puff of wind, a puff faint and tepid and laden with strange odours of blossoms...it was impalpable and enslaving, like a charm, like a whispered promise of mysterious delight.*

–Joseph Conrad, “Youth” (1898)

Singapore and the East have always attracted visitors, from the “gin-clear seas and golden sands” to the “waving casuarina trees”.<sup>1</sup> Explorers, travellers, traders and adventures came first, then artists, musicians, actors, dancers and, most importantly, writers who visited, stopped over and even stayed. The history, culture, geography and tropical climate seduced multiple generations fulfilling the declaration of Mr Sapsea in Charles Dickens’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*: “If I have not gone to foreign countries, young man, foreign countries have come to me.”<sup>2</sup> Literary travellers to Singapore often melded the two actions, visiting while imagining the Orient.

Such an interest in Singapore was part of an addictive Orientalism generated by art, artefacts, trade and spices brought from the East to the West that may have originated with Marco Polo in the thirteenth century. Later traders and explorers instilled a general fascination with the East underwritten by activities of the Dutch and British East India companies, both established in the early seventeenth century.

Orientalism as a discourse, a field of study, began in Europe in the mid- to late eighteenth century. It was initially the product of



## ii

imagination rather than experience, measured by introducing fixtures of Oriental life and ideas to Europe, often translated into Western beliefs of what the Orient must be like through travellers' tales and stories.<sup>3</sup> Its imaginative potential as an admired and mysterious space was unbounded. Writers tried to live up to it. As Joseph Conrad announces in "Youth", "I have seen its secret places and have looked into its very soul... The mysterious East faced me, perfumed like a flower, silent like death, dark like a grave."<sup>4</sup>

As Singapore grew from its founding in 1819, artists and writers soon appeared transmitting legends, myths and history through imaginations largely shaped through Western eyes. For these artists, Orientalising the Orient meant imposing Western dreams, images and ideas frequently at odds with actuality. And soon, a representative set of figures and images dominated, partly out of a fear of, yet also attraction to, the unknown. The "other" threatened, but armed with ideas from Samuel Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (1816), or the opium dens of Charles Dickens's *Edwin Drood*, or of Gustave Flaubert's salacious views of sex and the East, writers could adjust to the East through pre-conceived Orientalised imaginations.

James Joyce was no exception. Even he, in a sense, visited Singapore. In *Finnegans Wake* (1939), he refers to "Mellay Street", a reference to Malay Street, part of the Japanese enclave east of the Singapore River known for its brothels (FW 351.32). The Joycean pun is "Melee Street" for its many fights. Throughout his novel are numerous references to the Orient, including "in oreillant longuardness with alternate nightjoys of a thousand" (357.18) and later, at 450.02, a refence to "the shy orient". Even in Ireland, Joyce could not escape the aura of the Orient: one of Dublin's most well-known gathering spots where Joyce often stopped was Bewley's Oriental Café, cited in *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses* (1922).<sup>5</sup>

Notable literary travellers often repeated an imperial vision of Singapore but with concern. Conrad, Kipling, Maugham and even Noël Coward endorsed but also critiqued late nineteenth-century attitudes. Soon, a series of international writers like Anton Chekhov, Hermann Hesse, André Malraux and Pablo Neruda offered similar impressions, mixing fascination with surprise at the extensive colonialism that imposed a certain "politics of performance". This was an expected level of behaviour noted in the institutions, social practices, education and even architecture of late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Singapore.<sup>6</sup>

These writers/travellers wrote about unexpected adventures and unusual encounters generated by preconceptions of the Orient. But as a whole, this cosmopolitan gathering of authors, originating in Russia, Germany and France, as well as the United States, England and Chile, was not yet ready to re-write the history of the region, although they sensed the contested nature of its society.<sup>7</sup> This collection relays their reactions as writers who found Singapore a place they could not forget, incorporating its cultural, social and artistic life into their work. New "imaginative meanings" of the Orient resulted.<sup>8</sup>

But why Singapore? How did it infiltrate the consciousness and writing of its largely Western literary visitors? Through its mythology, geography and climate. But it also held mystery as Oriental dreams blended vice with the exotic represented in late-nineteenth-century literature where racialised stereotypes (see Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde or Arthur Conan Doyle) encouraged romanticised views of the magic of the East. They collectively created what the critic Edward Said called "the Orientalist stage", a system of codified images and ideas constructed in the West of what the East supposedly meant (Said, 67). The Orient is an idea that not only has a history and tradition of thought but also a set of images and vocabulary. The East was also,

as Benjamin Disraeli said in his mid-Victorian novel *Tancred* (1847), a career, especially for a Westerner eager to establish administrative credentials or wealth, exploring what Sidonia calls in the novel “the great Asian mystery”.<sup>9</sup> And for Disraeli’s *Tancred*, the salvation of the West is to be found in the East.

But this image of the East required re-writing. Yet the current set of writers did not fully see or sense how colonial practices and exploitations distorted the constructed and imposed vision of the East fashioned by the West. Colonial realities escaped many of these visitors, although some responded to the abuses on an individual literary level: Somerset Maugham, André Malraux and Anthony Burgess were aware; Charlie Chaplin, Bruce Lockhart and Alec Waugh were not. Neglect of imperialism’s effect was a common practice at the time. Singaporean writers, however, would soon write back and underscore the abuses, misrepresentations and distortions of imperialist views.<sup>10</sup>

Gradually, other literary visitors reacted more directly to Western views of the Orient and the impact of imperialism. Writers like Han Suyin, Lin Yutang, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Wole Soyinka came and witnessed the errors of vision from earlier writers. Progressively, there has been a stronger literary assertion of Singaporean and regional identities beginning not so much with the official establishment of the Republic of Singapore in 1965, but through writers and artists from the late 1920s onward affirming multicultural perspectives. Lim Boon Keng’s novel *Tragedies of Eastern Life* (1927), in its attempt to create a modern Asian subjectivity, outlines a useful, expansive strategy through conflicting concepts of Orientalism: British rule supposedly initiating a new modern world finds replacement by the Chinese in furthering the advancement of society. The “disciplinary regime of modernity,” a feature of colonial fiction, “is here applied to Chinese, not European bodies”.<sup>11</sup> The work has been called the first Singaporean novel in English. No longer did a single voice of cultural identity prevail; pluralism began to replace uniformity. The end of WWII likely accelerated the drive for literary and cultural independence.

Sonny Liew’s multigenerational graphic novel, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015), vividly summarises these critiques of a country where names like King George V Park, Queen Street and the Singapore Cricket Club (est. 1852) dominated public space. The name of Singapore’s first medical school was King Edward VII College of Medicine, established in 1905. Twenty years earlier, the colonial government established the Queen’s Scholarships, permitting select English-speaking students to attend British universities.

History’s part in this is clear. The transfer of the Straits Settlements from the India Office to the Colonial Office in 1867 meant the increased imposition of colonial rule initiated when the zone was named a “Crown Colony”, shortly after Sir Stamford Raffles was dispatched in 1819 by the Governor General of India to establish a base at the southern end of the Straits of Malacca. In 1822, his plan to administer the population, according to the colonial practice of racial separation, took shape.

When the Colonial Office in London took over administration, politics and government took on a different hue as the Straits Settlements assumed a new identity as a British colony. But resistance was early. In 1888, for example, the Chinese in Singapore demonstrated against government efforts to remove their businesses from the porches of their shophouses. These so called “Veranda Riots” began a series of protests from within the society. The overall directive was to re-make Singapore according to British standards and even forms. By 1910, the Municipal Government was altering the homes of the Chinese to make laneways with claims of public safety, health and law, in an effort to remake the city according to British standards, as the city expanded through the influx of workers and new wealth emerged. (Singapore’s trade increased eight times between 1873 and 1913.)

Of course, there were other visiting writers, in addition to the twenty-one listed here, who travelled to, or resided in, Singapore. Perhaps the most notable was the Eurasian Han Suyin, whose personal life as a physician and writer revolved around Malaya and Singapore. For nearly a decade, she lived in Johor Bahru and Singapore starting



in 1952. At one point, she opened a clinic on Upper Pickering Street and later became involved with the founding of Nanyang University, where she worked as a physician, not a professor of literature. Her goal, she claimed, was to make a new Asian literature, not teach Dickens. Her fiction and autobiographical volumes outline the efforts to achieve national identity in Southeast Asia against conflicts both internal and external. Her anti-imperialist views found expression in her writing, while her life was a set of complex literary crossings summarised in an excerpt from *And the Rain My Drink*, appearing in *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* (2009). The passage neatly skewers the prejudices and formal divisions of the social elite who separate into their “racial professions” marked by where and how they sit at a formal reception.<sup>12</sup>

But what was this Oriental world actually like? Objectively, accounts varied but a set of literary travellers began to recreate their experiences that were not so much geographical, political or sociological as they were a blend of the historical, imaginative, impressionistic and emotional. It was the impact, not the facts, of Southeast Asia that mattered. These literary travellers soon incorporated the East and Singapore in their writing as new subjects, and old vices began to dominate the writing, most clearly seen in Rudyard Kipling and Somerset Maugham. Deception, trickery or tests of courage began to govern their writing, often set in remote locations that seemed to encourage such behaviour, alternating between the Malayan jungle and Singapore opium dens. One of the more appealing views of the Padang in an 1851 painting by J.T. Thomson (the first government surveyor) was from the appropriately named *Scandal Point*.

The “imageability” of Singapore, conceived in numerous ways, linked history with myth, legend with fact. The city became the archetypal trading emporium and imaginative nexus between East and West. A persistent level of engagement for the literary travellers to Singapore, especially in Maugham, was the persistent involvement with Singapore’s troubled colonial narrative, symbolised in part by the

seven-day Sepoy Mutiny of February 1915, when over eight hundred Indian soldiers turned against British authority. Public executions followed. René Onraet’s *Singapore: A Police Background* (1946) narrates the adventures of the former head of Singapore’s Special Branch dealing with corruption at all levels in the city from 1910-33.

In contrast to colonial readings of Singapore, in which a world of privilege and politics was often identified by the literary travellers, some authors looked beyond the obvious and dug into the social and moral life of the city at every level. The panorama of the harbour was of less interest than the backstreets, the opium dens more fascinating than the Padang. Through the eyes of Conrad, Maugham or Malraux, supplemented by Kipling, Hesse or Neruda, one immediately senses an engagement with the mystery, beauty, romance and “glamour of the unknown”.<sup>13</sup> The appeal of the East to the writer was one of languor, freedom, adventure, exoticism, the unexpected and relief from the obligations and restrictions back home. It was inhaling the “spice-laden breeze” (“Vessel of Wrath,” 1). The irony, however, is discovering that the idea of romance was constantly unmade by a reality of mistrust, misadventure and mistakes.

This led to Singapore writing back, the concept that colonised countries could revoke colonial principles and expectations to create a new aesthetic. The concept draws from several ideas outlined in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989, 2002). This work summarises post-colonial responses to imperialist practices, opening a debate on the impact and effect of colonialism in an effort to unmask the positive image and representation of colonial life, as suggested by a number of the writers in this collection. Marginality became a source of creative energy. Fissures, not similarities, between colonial power and individual writers emerged simultaneously with the discovery of new national identities. The imperial-colonial dialectic was coming undone and the imperial centre, as Maugham or Malraux reveal, was being turned inside-out. Writing back reformulates the Orient, asking different

questions and providing diverse answers. The recovery and re-writing of denigrated cultures begins in this decentering counter-discourse which starts with the replacement of an imposed language.<sup>14</sup>

### iii

But Singapore's allure did not diminish; even tangential visitors with temporary stopovers continued to find Singapore stimulating. In 1926, for example, Aldous Huxley, on a ship between Singapore and the Philippines, read a copy of Henry Ford's *My Life and Work* (1922). It partially inspired *Brave New World* (1932). Nobel Prize winner William Golding, popular novelist James Michener (author of *Tales of the South Pacific* [1947]), Louis L'Amour, a prominent writer of Westerns, and Pico Iyer, travel writer and author of a recent anecdotal history of Raffles Hotel, are among those who passed through but creatively lingered.<sup>15</sup> French writers who visited included Jules Romains (1953) and Alain Robbe-Grillet (2004), preceded by Jules Verne, who imaginatively had Phileas Fogg visit the colony in *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873).

Those writers who stopped, explored, dawdled or stayed, however, absorbed experiences, which found their way directly or indirectly into their work. The French poet and filmmaker Jean Cocteau, the American humorist S.J. Perelman, and the American-Canadian science fiction writer William Gibson all came; the Chilean poet and diplomat Pablo Neruda, the British novelist Anthony Burgess and the American writer Paul Theroux are three who stayed.

But, of course, not everyone who travelled to Singapore was a writer. Scientists, movie stars, celebrities, politicians, singers and businessmen, ranging from Albert Einstein to Andrew Carnegie to Charlie Chaplin, journeyed to the Lion City.<sup>16</sup> Women travellers included Ida Pfeiffer, a naturalist who in 1851 spent two weeks in Singapore collecting plants, insects, mollusks, marine life and minerals. Nellie Bly visited in 1889 on her around-the-world journey of seventy-two days, beating Jules Verne's imaginative *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Martha Gellhorn, Hemingway's wife, visited in 1941. Even comic book heroes came. The two popular superheroines, Black Canary and Wildcat, of DC Comics's *Birds of Prey* series by Gail Simone, encountered threats and dangers as issues 81-84 (2005), set in Singapore, document.

But while many of these visitors produced travelogues, few produced literature. Those in this book are writers who wrote about Singapore within a literary frame, matching its history and legend, culture and society with intriguing characters, dramatic situations and narrative action. Simultaneously, they celebrated and decentered the idea of Singapore, whether in myth or experience. They realised that everything about the past and present of Singapore was multiple, unstable and without unity. The tight bond of a scripted history was in literature unravelling.

## iv

A typical visitor of the 1920s was Horace Bleackley, who spends four chapters on Singapore in his *A Tour in Southern Asia* (1928). A once-popular novelist and biographer, he saw early success in England with *Some Distinguished Victims of the Scaffold* (1905). Bleackley offered tourist views in late Edwardian prose. In a grandiose, almost imperial style, Bleackley praises the city and its apparent riches during his 1925 visit. Singapore is both imposing and attractive, even “picturesque”, constantly reminding him of England but tinged with the exotic.<sup>17</sup> Seeing the Anglican Cathedral with its tall spire and lawn is “like a vision of home”. But peering out of the window at a Chinese restaurant surrounds him with the exotic: he sees a narrow street “which teemed and effervesced with Chinese humanity” (Bleackley, 118, 158). The patronising tone is part of an imperial sense of superiority.

Such language and reaction to the “sights” of Singapore continue with his constant comparisons to England, noting the contrast between the elegant façades of the English-styled buildings and the congested streets of the Chinese, where the homes are filthy and smell. But to his surprise, these “squalid habitations” were no more than fifty yards from the splendid Europe Hotel. Such passages record the depressing life of the Chinese in patronising, if not insulting terms, praising only two habits: opium and fireworks (Bleackley, 133, 135).

Socially, Raffles Hotel reigned supreme, partly because three nights a week, dances occurred. Bleackley, however, prefers the Europe Hotel, located at the western end of the Padang and run by the celebrated general manager, Arthur Odell. Bleackley goes on to defend the British against the cliché of excessive drinking, explaining that it’s hard to quench one’s thirst in such a hot country, rationalising that “drink is less injurious in a climate where everyone perspires freely” (Bleackley, 154). A gimlet or gin pahit before lunch and dinner is always welcomed. And Bleackley celebrates the economic advantages of young Englishmen

## ISABELLA BIRD: HER COURSE OF FLIGHT

*This is absolutely tropical. Here are mangrove swamps and fringes of coco palms and banana groves and date and sago and travellers palms and tree ferns and India rubber and mango and...all kinds of parrots, blossoms...and birds of gorgeous colours...and every costume from Arabia to China floats through the streets.*

–Isabella Bird on arriving in Singapore (13 January 1879)

The active, adventurous Isabella Bird was part of a long tradition of female travellers and travel writers including, in the fifteenth century, Margery Kempe, whose *The Book of Margery Kempe* was published in the late 1430s. The English poet and wife of the British ambassador to Turkey, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* became popular in 1763. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* followed in 1796. By the nineteenth century, women had travelled and written about the Middle East, West Africa, America and Southeast Asia. Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897) followed the work of the intrepid Isabella Bird, whose account of Singapore in *The Golden Chersonese* appeared in 1883.

Importantly, travel was a liberating experience for women, freeing them from housebound experiences, enacting independence, courage and emancipation. Some pioneering female travellers who documented distinctive spaces, imperial actions and remarkable sights were Ida Pfeiffer, Nellie Bly (the first person to travel around the world in less than eighty days in 1889-90), Elizabeth Bisland, whose *Flying Tour Around the World* appeared in 1891, Gertrude Bell, Emily Hahn and more.<sup>1</sup>



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks for guidance and direction to Kevin Riordan, Daniel Jernigan, Richard Alan Barlow and the School of Humanities at Nanyang Technological University; Michael Earley, formerly Dean, Faculty of Performance Arts at Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore; Ong Eng Chuan, National Library of Singapore; Agustina Mohando and Andrés Borlone of the Embassy of Chile in Singapore; and at Epigram Books, Edmund Wee, Eldes Tran, Jayashree Panicker and Priti Sharma. Cecily Williams of the University of British Columbia has been a tremendous help, while Anne MacKenzie, Ryan Nadel and Dara, Jon, Gideon, Levi and Coby Pavlich have been eager supporters and cheerleaders. The Vancouver Public Library was also instrumental in assisting with the research for this project.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ira Nadel is a Professor of English at the University of British Columbia, Canada. He has lectured throughout Europe, North America and Southeast Asia and has taught at Nanyang Technical University, Singapore and the University of Singapore. His publications include *Biography: Fiction, Fact & Form* and *Modernism's Second Act: A Cultural Narrative*. He has also written biographies on Leonard Cohen, Tom Stoppard, David Mamet and Philip Roth.



*Singapore Flings: Literary Stopovers from Chekhov to Tagore* provides fascinating insights into the travels and adventures of twenty-one international writers to the Lion City. Ira Nadel details the impact Singapore's history and culture had on the lives of literary greats like Anton Chekhov, Anthony Burgess, Jan Morris and Rabindranath Tagore, among others, and explores how Singapore left a lasting impression on the imagination and writings of these travellers.

**Isabella Bird**

**Pierre Boulle**

**Anthony Burgess**

**Charlie Chaplin**

**Anton Chekhov**

**Jean Cocteau**

**Joseph Conrad**

**Noël Coward**

**J.G. Farrell**

**Martha Gellhorn**

**Hermann Hesse**

**Rudyard Kipling**

**Bruce Lockhart**

**André Malraux**

**Somerset Maugham**

**Jan Morris**

**Pablo Neruda**

**Tom Stoppard**

**Rabindranath Tagore**

**Paul Theroux**

**Alec Waugh**

“A fascinating and well-documented literary tour. Nadel is an expert biographer and a masterful storyteller who views Singapore as ‘a gateway, a beginning, a point of origin’ for the literary imagination.”

—*Micheal Earley, former Dean, Faculty of Performing Arts,  
LASALLE College of the Arts*



NON-FICTION

ISBN 978-981-49-8483-6



9 789814 984836

[www.epigram.sg](http://www.epigram.sg)