

J.G. Farrell The Singapore Grip

By Drew Calvert

The Singapore Grip is the final installment of J.G. Farrell's "Empire Trilogy," which chronicles the spectacle of British colonialism over the course of two centuries, from Ireland to India to Southeast Asia. It is also the only Anglo-American work of fiction set primarily in the city in which I grew up. I discovered it over a decade ago on the shelves of a secondhand bookstore in a corner of Far East Plaza, these days one of downtown Singapore's lesser shopping malls. The bookstore was popular among Singaporean university students looking for discount study guides, backpackers swapping travelogues, and expatriate wives searching for profiles of philanthropists and monks.

I noticed the book on the shelf but never bothered to inspect its cover; it sounded like an account of geopolitical strategy or a moist homage to British glory. It did not occur to me that *The Singapore Grip* could be a work of literature, because in that stage of my life, I'd come to believe that literature took place in London or New York, not Singapore. With the exception of Vietnam War stories, I had not read any English-language literature with Southeast Asia as its principle subject. What I had read were coffee-table books of Cambodian ruins, predictable pseudo-spiritual travelogues, gap-year tales of hallucinogens and snake blood, the columns of globalization buffs like Thomas Friedman and Fareed Zakaria, and the memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew. In English class, George Orwell was introduced as the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, not a lapsed imperialist who fled British India; Anthony Burgess was

New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2005.

the author of *A Clockwork Orange*, not *The Malayan Trilogy*, a comic novel set in pre-independence Malaysia. When I left Singapore at eighteen, I searched other literary traditions for the deep reservoir of wisdom I felt I had missed in that materialistic, utilitarian, thoroughly corporate city-state. I studied Russian, I read as widely as possible in the American tradition; in 2008, I moved to China and taught English literature to a small group of university students. It was in Beijing, at the height of the financial crisis, that I began to wonder whether I had lived through a unique historical period, one in which the American Empire had reached its zenith and begun its slow collapse. Every so often a detail would flare up from memory: In 1998, while a financial crisis wreaked havoc on the economies of Southeast Asia and the streets of Jakarta filled with protesters, I overheard a man wearing a Cornell tee shirt in the lobby of a five-star hotel say: "This is the time to buy those Indonesian puppets." In 2000, a pregnant Filipina maid jumped from the fifteenth floor of an expatriate high-rise building. At the bars along the Singapore River, US sailors discussed Thai women and oil traders discussed their companies' assets over mugs of Tiger beer. A classmate of mine from the international school once stole the towel of a Bangladeshi construction worker while he showered in a public restroom. (In retrospect, the misbehavior of American teenagers seems closely aligned with neoliberal economics: it's all about what you can get away with.) Because I lacked a sound ideology, these memories had no organizing principle; they remained minor traumas and curiosities.

Even after I decided that the multicultural arcadia of my youth was in many respects a sham (some journalists began calling it "Disneyland with the death penalty"), I still had an inexplicable desire to belong there, even if only in memory. This ambivalence has the potential to be toxic. Despite his keen sense of social justice, George Orwell was occasionally nostalgic for Anglo-India, and while this seems to have afforded him certain insights into authoritarian personalities, it was also clearly a source of debilitating shame. *Burmese Days*, Orwell's most thorough (and mostly autobiographical) account of on-the-ground imperialism, is powerful and clear-eyed, but leaves its readers without a shred of hope.

Earlier this year I took a trip to Penang, the first British colony in Malaysia, and it was there that I finally read *The Singapore Grip*. Its effect is different from *Burmese Days*. It is much funnier, and also more "literary," in the sense that it is less polemical. Farrell lampoons the absurdity of the British colonial experience in Singapore, but he does so with a fanatical attention to detail and a keen historical perspective, thus implicating his Anglo-American readers in something more cor-

rupt than the hypocrisies of businessmen and their disappointing progeny (one of whom makes the wonderful mistake of inviting a yogi to a company jubilee). It is clear that Farrell is not a cheerleader for Britain's governance model and economic policy. Still, he does not build an allegorical framework in order to codify its injustices on strictly ideological grounds; instead, he describes the entire mess.

He also assigns himself the dual role of historian and storyteller, with a narrative voice that falls somewhere between Monty Python and Tolstoy. In the first chapter, he writes that Singapore's "founder," Sir Stanford Raffles, "was by no means the lantern-jawed individual you might have expected: indeed, a rather vague-looking man in a frock coat," then follows this up with a thirty-page profile of the colonial rubber industry. Near the end of the novel, before he describes the gruesome murder of Chinese citizens at the hands of occupying Japanese soldiers, he reminds readers in an aside that the Tanglin golf course was blessed with "respectable greens." *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the second volume of the trilogy, is filled with descriptions of Indian weather in the same ironic mode ("Picture a map of India as a big tennis court with two or three hedgehogs crawling over it . . . each hedgehog might represent one of the dust storms which during the summer wander aimlessly here and there over the Indian plains"), but the weather has dire consequences. Farrell's strategy of oscillating between satire and epic does not allow for complacent reading. Just when readers of *The Singapore Grip* think they can settle into a comic novel of matters, history intervenes in the form of a Japanese airstrike:

The first bomb landed in the long-disused swimming pool sending up a great column of water which hung in the air for a moment like a block of green marble before crashing down again. Another bomb landed simultaneously in the road, blowing a snowstorm of red tiles off the Mayfair's roof and out over the compound, and another in the grove of old rubber which lay between the Mayfair and the Blackett's house.

More than anything, what makes this novel powerful is that it goes in search of what is elemental about the era it describes. Beneath the irony is a genuine curiosity about the details of human life that are occulted within the historical process. Farrell himself once explained his literary impulse by pointing out that "history leaves out the most important thing of all: the detail of what being alive is like."

First published in 1978, *The Singapore Grip* is full of contemporary echoes: petty egos deciding the fates of nations, Quran burnings followed by riots, Sinophilia and Sinophobia, the anxiety of Western intellectuals, the excesses of capitalism, a sickening military-industrial complex. The title is a reference to a

phenomenon rumored to be central to the “colonial experience” but that remains a mystery to Matthew Webb, young Oxford graduate, likely inheritor of his father’s rubber empire, vegetarian, naïve defender of the League of Nations, and proponent of international brotherhood. He arrives in Singapore a few years before Japanese bombs begin to fall on Bukit Timah. The conceit of *The Singapore Grip*—which refers to an erotic act popular among prostitutes but is variously interpreted as a secret communist handshake, a disease, a cocktail, a macroeconomic anomaly, a mode of governance, a hairpin, or a rattan-style handbag (“like a Shanghai basket, but smaller”)—is timeless in the way it reveals the symbols that compose a social hierarchy. In fact, if you changed a few words, the novel could pass for a send-up of contemporary expatriate life in Southeast Asia, with its sense of entitlement (“To the indignation of Tanglin the Cold Storage had stopped baking white bread”), spiritual bankruptcy (“Who’s going to die for the stock exchange?”) and the paradox of insisting on timeless normalcy while indulging in paranoia (“Could you be altogether certain that you would not find yourself sharing your soufflé with a Japanese parachutist?”). And it foreshadows, too, the tendency among contemporary Western executives in Asia to interpret their global deal making and price fixing as cross-cultural exchange. Before there were CEOs quoting from the *Sunzi* to explain their enlightened strategy of underpaying workers in Guangzhou, there were executives who saw that “Oriental” authoritarian power could be an asset to their firms. Farrell manages to capture this in a single brief episode:

Yes, Gordon Bennett had recognized in the Sultan a really high-class person, and the Sultan, for his part, he felt sure, had not altogether failed to notice his own qualities of good breeding. Not long before, so he had heard, a guest of the Sultan, a titled English lady, had expressed a caprice to swim in the shark-infested Strait of Johore. For many a host this would have been too much, but not for the Sultan. What had he done? He had instructed several hundred of his palace guards to enter the water and link hands to form a shark-proof enclosure in which the lady could safely bathe. That, Bennett knew, was class. He could tell a classy act a mile off.

But there is one way in which the novel is timeless: it reveals the arbitrary nature of our identities, affections, and convictions. It does not propose a solution to the injustice inherent in colonial (or postcolonial) economies; it does not offer an uplifting message of liberty or solidarity. It merely invites readers to consider the fact that the world is full of people we might have been. By investing creative energy in his character’s illusions, Farrell is able to show us how easily we might have been, for example, a French diplomat with little to do but polish his monocle, a Malay rubber

planter, an idealistic Oxford type who clings to international justice “like barnacles clinging to the hull of a sinking ship,” a jitterbugging Filipino aristocrat, a Chinese shop owner, an American writing an exposé on the indignities of pineapple canning, or a Eurasian housekeeper who speaks her own incomprehensible dialect. This is the quality that separates the novelist from the historian, the writer from the polemicist. Nobody writes a trilogy of novels simply to prove a point. It requires a particular kind of curiosity and a persistent imagination, what Nabokov once called “insubordination in its purest form.”

I read *The Singapore Grip* at a hostel along Love Lane, the same narrow street Sir Stanford Raffles stayed on during his first visit to Penang in 1805. When I was finished reading, I visited the museums. I read a letter written by a Malay spiritual leader attacking the British East India Company and the irredeemable decadence of Western civilization. I scanned the photographs of Sun Yat Sen during his tour through Southeast Asia to raise funds for the Chinese revolution. And late that afternoon I found myself standing in the preserved, pre-independence bedroom of a Malaysian-Chinese teenager, staring at a pair of bejeweled wedding slippers enclosed in a fine glass case. The house had Scottish stained-glass windows, a stately Confucian dining room, and bright Malay fabrics hanging from the walls. It occurred to me that what distinguishes Farrell’s novel is its fascination with how a series of details can undermine the version of history we want to believe. And it gave me hope to think that even a satirist relies on that mysterious human impulse for which a pair of wedding slippers is as interesting as an empire.