

DI YERBURY'S LAUNCH SPEECH FOR *HONG KONG LOVER*

There are no less than 10 reasons I'm delighted to launch Marya's book in Sydney.

1. Firstly, the novel is my favourite literary form. A day's not complete for me without reading. So I approached Marya's first novel, after her plays, and autobiographical and biographical works, with real interest and pleasurable anticipation.
2. Secondly, Hong Kong is one of my favourite places. I've visited it more than 70 times. I once wrote a short story about lovers based in Hong Kong. But any tales I might come up with about adventures in that beautiful part of the world are totally overshadowed by the exotic experiences of Marya's heroines in Hong Kong in the 1960s: Julia, the beautiful blonde Australian singer, who sleeps with everyone but remains a "nice girl"; her Chinese friend, "loud-mouthed" Lee: "straight from the bars and brothels of Kowloon"; and the narrator, Terry, who's deserted teaching to travel, and works for the Entertainment Director of the Miramar Hotel, which engages Julia for its nightclub.

Terry looks back on it all 30 years later in Sydney, where she meets up again with the still glamorous Julia.

3. Thirdly, I've been having a frazzled week, getting ready to set off overseas this afternoon, and I really needed a laugh – which I certainly got. I'd defy anyone not to laugh out loud reading this novel: it's hilarious!

Just have a look at Julia's "welcome to Hong Kong" on p.15 as an example: "as he, she and Ravel's *Bolero* were reaching their mutually satisfying climax in his cabin" with the whole of Hong Kong watching through the porthole.

But the scene where I really fall apart laughing is when Julia is invited to become a film star along with Lee, in a so-called "art movie", and finds out the hard way what the plot is in connection with the kitchen table covered in choi and other vegies. I promise you'll never feel quite the same again about a meat sandwich with tomato sauce!

4. I also greatly enjoyed Marya's effortless sense of place, seen through the eyes of expatriates, locals, tourists, troops on R & R from Vietnam – all classes. On arrival, as her rickshaw dodges in and out of lines of cars along overcrowded streets bedecked with neon lights in all colours, Julia is struck by the noise, heat, harsh light and the overpowering food odours, mixed with those of open drains and sandalwood incense from the little altars above every stall.

And anyone familiar with Hong Kong will instantly recognise the hair-raising driving, and obsession with gambling – with Lee an enthusiastic offender on both counts.

5. The novel is evocative also in its recall of the times – the 1960s – in this particular place. Julia arrives during the riots over increases in the Star Ferry's fares. Hong Kong is unsettled by the Cultural Revolution in China, and Terry herself is lucky to be only slightly hurt when the Red Guards "come over the border and they're rampaging around the streets, terrorising everyone". Her injury occurs when a bomb they've planted in a brown paper bag explodes in Nathan Road.

Water restrictions are imposed at the same time, and Lee has the bright idea of going to the cocktail parties on board the warships from Vietnam, refuelling in Hong Kong's harbour, where Julia and Lee delight their young naval hosts by sharing their showers.

Julia agrees to do an entertainment tour for the troops, performing on makeshift bamboo stages in the jungles of Vietnam and smoking pot to make the tour "just bearable", while the helicopter detours en route to the next venue to pick up wounded and dead soldiers.

6. A special element Marya captures superbly is the sense of being young and reckless in Hong Kong at that time in the 'sixties, grabbing fun while they can in the nightclubs and the waters of Repulse Bay, with little thought for the longer term. There's a vivid scene shortly after the lethal bomb in Nathan Road, when Julia and Lee have an extravagant night out.

"They had wobbled home with their arms around each other, detouring widely around every scrap of trash lying along the footpath, each time shouting, 'Bomb! It's a bomb!'

"Four black GIs and their bar girls leaving the Firecracker Bar ducked and wove behind them, forming a sort of conga line.

"In between bomb scares, they sang *Feelin' Groovy* at the top of their voices."

7. That brings me to a further pleasure in store for readers, namely, the way Marya brings the unique place and the times together with the music of the 'sixties, her characters being associated with different songsters as with a particular perfume. Remember Simon & Garfunkel's *San Francisco*, and its "gentle people with flowers in their hair"? And Jesus loving Mrs Robinson more than she would ever know?

For all its hilarity, there are sad parts in the book, where the characters greet "darkness my old friend", and stretch out "a bridge over troubled waters". And one moving scene I won't readily forget occurs when Julia's on tour in Vietnam:

"Since the helicopter was not equipped medically, she often watched helplessly as life slipped away while she cradled dying heads, crooning Nina's [Simone] melodies."

8. I've said the book is outrageously funny in parts, but obviously it's by no means just about "sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll" in the 'sixties. It's about what Zorba the Greek famously called "the full catastrophe". It includes real love, commitment, real loss, illegal abortion, babies.....

And there are deaths too, including that of a beloved journalist, swallowed up in a landslide he's gone out to cover for his newspaper. Lee organises a Chinese ceremony, saying: "We must burn paper money, paper clothes, food, make sure he proper fed, proper dress and also rich" in his new home in the spirit world.

9. Cantonese culture permeates the novel, another backdrop of which is race relations and associated class distinctions. Decades later in Sydney, Terry still marvels at the close friendship between the apparently ill-matched Julia, and Lee who "met for tea most afternoons in the lobby of the Peninsula Hotel, like respectable tai-tais".

Then there's Jack who, Lee says, has "yellow fever": he only seriously dates Chinese women, and dreams of marrying one from a good family. From Bendigo, he has always been fascinated by local Chinese families, and since he was six years old had been part of the lion dances and dragon dances. "Jack, who looked in the mirror every morning, hoping that overnight his skin had turned yellow, his hair black, his eyes slanted....."

Julia becomes the instant love of the English-educated "tall slim Chinese man", Junior, son of the wealthy "art film" director. His father, Ping, "say Junior marries the nice Chinese girl that Mother Ping and her matchmaker mates have selected for him". Junior refuses. He is determined to win his parents around and marry Julia. Ping's opposition evaporates when Julia attracts world-wide media coverage: "Beautiful blonde Australian singer risks typhus....to dive into the polluted waters of Hong Kong harbour and rescue Chinese boat racers!"

Just as she flies home to north-west Queensland, wondering if her own parents would have accepted a Chinese son-in-law, Junior sends a radio message: "Dad says you're a hero of the people! Insists I marry you." The song changes from "Are you lonesome tonight?" to "My baby just cares for me".

And what happens next? Ah, for that you'll have to read the novel.....

10. Marya herself lived in Hong Kong from 1966 to 1974. She describes *Hong Kong Lover* as fiction, albeit with some background events based on her own experiences. I've been teasing her that I'd tell you what I've learnt about her personal past from the extravagant sex romps.

But what I've actually learnt about Marya from *Hong Kong Lover* is that she's a real novelist – and a darned good one at that.

For all its fun, and its immediate appeal as a "good read", this is a complex, layered, often moving, international novel, with strong characterisation and lively dialogue. It can be read on several levels – each one fascinating in its own right. And of course, I very much enjoy the fact that it's about independent women who've lived life to the full, looking back on that life from later years.