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San Francisco Chronicle

BOOK REVIEW

SECTION
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Sunday,
October 6, 2002

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Lonely life of a 'practice wife'

The Girl From the Coast

By Pramodya Ananta Toer,
translated by Willem Samuel

HYPERION EAST, 280 PAGES, \$22.95

Plenty of people have known the agony of losing a day's work to a computer power surge, today's equivalent of mythology's arbitrary thunderbolts. When friends suffer a data crash, the only thing for it is to point them toward Garrison Keillor's stingingly funny introduction to his book "Like Wolseleg Days," in which the author mourns his 1974 misplacement of a manuscript

in a train station and admits, inconceivably, "I am still waiting for it to come back."

Try to imagine what it must feel like to lose not a day's work but a decade's, and you may get some idea of the bereavement that the Nobel-touted Indonesian writer Pramodya Ananta Toer lives with every day. His lovely novel "The Girl From the Coast," newly published by editor Will Schwalbe's heroic Hyperion East imprint, is all that remains of an early trilogy whose second and third manuscripts the Indonesian military destroyed beyond salvage.

As we discover in the book's revelatory, redemptive epilogue, "The Girl From the Coast" derives from autobiographical stories the author's grandmother told him when he was a child. It's about a happy, unmarried girl from a humble fishing village, whom a Muslim aristocrat from the city spirits away to become his latest "practice wife."

The girl leaves family and friends behind for a life of stifling privilege and loneliness behind the walls of her husband's manor, her only confidante a wise maidervent who rebuffs all the girl's attempts to treat her as an equal. Only after the girl bears her lord and master a daughter does she ultimately learn just how dispensable a practice wife can be.

At first "The Girl From the Coast" can be read as a fairly straightforward hill of indictment against its heroine's new, civilized life and in favor of her old, primitive one. We've seen this story before, from Rousseau to Ishi to "Sweet Home Alabama," though rarely so gracefully told as here.

Where sophisticated ways come off in these archetypal stories as materialistic, sexist and intolerant, country manners turn out to be egalitarian, matriarchal and cheerfully accepting.

What sets "The Girl From the Coast" apart and makes it glow, is the tremendous psychological acuity Toer brings to the subject of human interactions. The book's centerpiece comes when the girl can't take her opulent, cluttered life any more and returns to her village for a visit. Heartbreakingly, even her parents now treat her like an empress instead of a human being. She goes home looking for affection and finds only defecence.

Purely on the level of dialogue and scene craft, Toer's exchanges are marvels of the novelist's art. The delicacy with which she sketches in the girl's hope for a homecoming, the gradual foreshadowing that all may not turn out as planned, the complexity as she comes to understand that her parents both love and fear her — Toer shapes it all with an impossible finesse of a master glassblower.

"Dear God," the banished girl eventually prays, when she's separated from her daughter, "use your power to keep her from ever recognizing me. And keep me from ever seeing her again. But protect her, this child of mine, who will never know her mother, though she did once taste her mother's milk."

Toer has translated Steinbeck into Indonesian, and it shows. Like Steinbeck he's unafraid of large emotions

► KIPEN: Page M5

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Tony Horwitz follows Capt. Cook's route and finds what's left in his wake

Global swarming

Reviewed by John McMurtrie
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Tony Horwitz has done it again. In his earlier, riveting book, "Confederates in the Attic," he journeyed through the South to explore the rich and thorny legacy of the Civil War. With the same keen insight, open-mindedness and laugh-out-loud humor, he undertakes another daunting quest in "Blue Latitudes" — to travel across the globe in search of the memory of Capt. James Cook, the 18th century English explorer whose ambition led him, as he famously put it, "not on-ly farther than any other man has been before me, but as far I think it possible for man to go."

Cook may have ventured to the ends of the Earth — his three major voyages took him to such far away places as Australia and Alaska — but for all his astounding feats the man is largely misunderstood or simply unknown. In a typical exchange during his own adventures, Horwitz approaches a vendor in Tahiti, one of several places Cook visited. "Connaissez-vous Capitaine Cook?" he asks, only to be met with a blank stare, then given a Coke.

For many of those who have heard of Cook, Horwitz finds, the explorer remains a hotly debated subject, often along racial lines — not unlike the Civil War in much of the South. Touring New Zealand, which Cook sailed to in 1769, Horwitz is invited by a group of Maori, the native islanders, to a discussion on the proposed wording for a new statue that Cook built are backing. "James Cook was a fine seaman, a great captain and an honest man," the text reads. Hearing this, the Maori are furious, one of them angrily offers an alternative: "Here's where the first murderer stood."

Traveling the world while reading Cook's journals, Horwitz discovers that the truth about the navigator is more complex than most would like to believe. Some he meets go so far as to rewrite history to suit their misguided, alcohol-fueled re-enactments

► COOK: Page M4

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A sixth sense through four generations

Reviewed by Eliza Wilmerding

Along the lines of novels that enrich our idea of what is "real" (works by Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes, Isabel Allende) fits Alev Lytle Crouzier's new book, "Seven Houses." Crouzier, a San Francisco and Paris-based writer who was born and raised in Turkey, wrote two nonfiction books on Turkey and the Middle East ("Harem: The World Behind the Veil" and "Taking the Waters") and one historical romance novel ("The Palace of Tears"). In her new book she focuses again on Turkey and spins memory, knowledge, lore and history into a highly imaginative



Seven Houses
By Alev Lytle Crouzier
ATRIA,
304 PAGES, \$24

family saga spanning the 20th century. "Seven Houses" is the panoramic story of four generations of Turkish women in the Ipekçi silk-making family who find their way through the ebb and flow of wealth, social freedom and their country's

turbulent history. There is the widow, Esma, whose love for another man is forbidden, her niece, Papaya, whose family can't help her because "only God has the right to interfere between a husband and a wife." There is beautiful Ada, who ignores the wise men's warnings and suffers the consequences; Maria, who keeps her identity secret to shield her family from danger. There is the protective Camilla, who fights evil spirits and curses to give birth to a living baby. Finally, there is Esma's granddaughter, Amber, who connects with elders, comes of age and feels the pull between "progress" and reconnecting with her country's old soul — a

pervasive theme throughout the book. Crouzier's measured prose is artistic and sensuous. By weaving her historical tale with surreal coincidences, premonitions and the supernatural, she offers a refreshing break from the contemporary trend of realist storytelling. The form fits her story well. The culture presented in "Seven Houses" values dreams, spirits, myths, religion and the work of charms. The boundaries between fact and fiction blurred. And, as Allende once said, "tell me a story." ► CROUZIER: Page M4

Eliza Wilmerding is a San Francisco writer.

M4 San Francisco Chronicle

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2002

San Francisco Chronicle Best-Sellers

Table with 3 columns: Rank, Title, Author, Price. Includes 'The Lovely Bones', 'Summerland', 'Blessings', 'Lullaby', 'Middlesex', 'The Piano Tuner', 'Book of Illusions', 'The Butlerian Jihad', 'Blood of Victory', 'The Nanny Diaries'.

Table with 3 columns: Rank, Title, Author, Price. Includes 'Longitudes and Attitudes', 'NoBODY's Perfect', 'Zuni Cafe Cookbook', 'How to Be Alone', 'The Age of Gold', 'Step Across This Line', 'By the Grace of the Sea', 'Stupid White Men', 'Dr. Tatum's Sex Advice to All'.

Table with 3 columns: Rank, Title, Author, Price. Includes 'The Corrections', 'Bel Canto', 'Empire Falls', 'Fast Food Nation', 'The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay', 'Peace Like a River', 'Carter Beats the Devil', 'Fury', 'A Time for Choices', 'Two in the Field'.

Table with 3 columns: Rank, Title, Author, Price. Includes 'Nights in Rodanthe', 'The Lovely Bones', 'Blessing', 'Red Rabbit', 'Kiljoy', 'Shink Rap', 'Dark Horse', 'Butterian Jihad', 'The Crimson Petal', 'Let's Roll', 'Longitudes and Attitudes', 'Let Freedom Ring', 'What We Saw', 'Above Hallowed Ground', 'Slender', 'A Mind at a Time', 'Among the Heroes', 'The Cell', 'Crossroads of Freedom'.

The houses tell stories

► CROUTIER From Page M1

that which is important in our lives has a place in literature — our sense of family, religion, and superstition, too.

The magic begins with the narrators. The women's stories are told by the voices of the seven houses they inhabit over the decades. The houses listen and peer into the thoughts, prayers and dreams of the peppy family.

Family members also have surprising abilities. Some have a sixth sense that they use to save each other. One character, like the Hellenic gods who worship the houses, weeps diamonds when she hears of a lost lover.

When the Greeks set Izmir on fire, Esma prays for ice while her maid makes a charm and prays for rain, the heavens answer with hail.

There are other surreal scenes: A young patriarch, angry at the loss of his family's silk fortune, hurls a coffee cup out the window; it shatters and imbeds into the cement below.

Yet "Seven Houses" depends on history as much as myth. Aside from a minor historical sketch near its beginning, the book shows how Turkey's trans-

formations affects the peppy both as the changes happen and later, when, as aged characters, they remember the past.

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I'll Take You There

By Joyce Carol Oates

National Book Award recipient Joyce Carol Oates — who has published, to date, 87 volumes of fiction, short stories, novels, poetry, plays, essays and juvenilia — is a writer whom I often read and even now and then re-read.

The answer is, Oates doesn't take risks. She remains safely within the confines of her capabilities and experience. In a way, her books are like the age we live in — brash but unimaginative.

"I'll Take You There," her latest novel, offers some potentially large themes: the account of a young woman's rite of passage in the early '60s through cruel college sorority life and interracial love, gray-jaysexuality and literary breakthrough.

Occasionally, the moxy narrator tries to take on the establishment (it is the '60s, after all, as when she announces her partially Jewish ancestry to her WASPish, biased pledge sisters and they whisper about it among themselves, or when she falls in love with a brilliant black doctoral candidate).

Yet overall, experiencing the '60s through Oates' suburban sensibility and prose is like listening to the Rolling Stones "Satisfaction" played on a kazoo. Like most of her works, "I'll Take You

REVIEWS IN BRIEF

I'll Take You There



There's simply doesn't take us anyone important to be.

Life Itself!

By Elaine Dundy

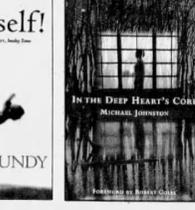
Once upon a time, in the decades before World War II, there was a little girl who lived the unhappily in great luxury on Central Park West and on Park Avenue. At the end of her fascinating memoir, "Life Itself!" which concludes in 2001, Elaine Dundy is happily encountered at the opposite end of the continent in the Park-La Brea complex, an urban village alive with multicultural complexity in midtown Los Angeles.

In the years between these perches, she moved to Paris and then to London, where she married the already-eminent theater critic Kenneth Tynan and wrote two well-known novels: "The Dud Avocado" and "The Old Man and Me." After her divorce in the 1960s, she struggled with depression and addiction but managed to write successful books about Peter Finch and Elvis Presley.

For the dozen years of her union with Tynan, Dundy met a huge variety of fascinating characters, from Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh to Tennessee Williams and Ernest Hemingway.

Creenville, Miss., is a place where the violence of modern urban life and the prejudiced thinking of the Old South feed on each other. Families in white

Life Itself!



Dundy with a chance to tell her side of things, which certainly balances her ex-husband's account, which attempted to portray the sadist-as-victim.

She pulls no punches in revealing details of the unpleasant side of her marriage to Tynan. But she also evokes the joys of those days, and there is a notable lack of bitterness, which leaves a much better taste in the mouth of the reader than did Tynan's diaries.

Once a top school, Greenville High has descended into a nightmare of crime, violence and teacher intimidation by students — some of whom have been in high school long enough to have completed it twice. Johnston begins his tenure as an idealistic young educator but soon realizes the grim realities of the situation.

But Johnston chronicles both the bleak and the bright. It's in his debted to him than debted. So, really, isn't it absurd that the lesser debt, of gratitude, I pay, but the greater one, of forgiveness, I defer?

In the Deep Heart's Core

By Michael Johnston

Creenville, Miss., is a place where the violence of modern urban life and the prejudiced thinking of the Old South feed on each other. Families in white neighborhoods pool money to purchase houses for sale, preventing black families from buying them.

But Johnston chronicles both the bleak and the bright. It's in his debted to him than debted. So, really, isn't it absurd that the lesser debt, of gratitude, I pay, but the greater one, of forgiveness, I defer?

Near the end of the voyage, however, Cook must have found it difficult to despair. Also, his illness and exhaustion no doubt hastened his death.

Today, a monument stands not far from where Cook was killed. When Horwitz visits the obelisk, he finds it marked with this message: "Whitely Go Home." As elsewhere in the Pacific, Cook's legacy is not cherished by most Hawaiians.

Today, a monument stands not far from where Cook was killed. When Horwitz visits the obelisk, he finds it marked with this message: "Whitely Go Home." As elsewhere in the Pacific, Cook's legacy is not cherished by most Hawaiians.

Trying to make sense of Capt. Cook's legacy

► COOK From Page M1

(one of which Horwitz, also drunk, hilariously recounts). While no saint, Cook, for the most part, "treated natives with tolerance and restraint," Horwitz writes. (His crewmate, chatting after island women, showed less restraint.) Nevertheless, Cook could be cruel, and he ultimately met his end when Hawaiians responded in kind, beating and stabbing him to death.

Most important, Horwitz argues, because Cook was the first Westerner to explore such a vast part of the globe, he drew a map of it "much like the one we know today. ... Cook, in sum, pioneered the voyage we are still on, for good and ill."

Horwitz could have written a dry account of Cook while sitting at home in Virginia, poring over musty volumes. But thinking back to his childhood, when he captained a tiny sailboat ("We Dream"), the former journalist chose to go on an odyssey of his own, lured by the familiar-sounding words not of James Cook, but of James Kirk, of "Star Trek," to "boldly go where no man has gone before."

Of course, man had already gone before him, so Horwitz had to improvise. But he does a remarkable job of it, volunteering as a grunt on a replica of Cook's first ship, the Endeavour, in the 1990s, hopping aboard flimsy yachts in the South Pacific, and having a miserable time on a hellish ferry in Alaskan waters. All this shoving about gives him a deep appreciation of what sailing must have been like for Cook and his crews — of the 94 crewmen who boarded the Endeavour, 36 died of disease or accidents.

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Horwitz's voyage also allows him to chronicle his own petty miseries to far greater effect than the sober-minded Cook would have ventured. Besides, Cook didn't travel with Roger Williamson, a hard-drinking, wine-cracking Australian buddy of Horwitz's who joins the author for several legs of his journey.

"Think about it," Roger says after he and Horwitz toast French Polynesia, which, to their disappointment, is warming with tourists and littered with trash. "Those blokes on the Douglas? They were scary, wrecked, sex-mad, fed on biscuits full of weevils. Any place off that ship would have looked like paradise."

Saturally, much of the world that Cook explored has changed dramatically, and Horwitz, forever sharp-eyed, conveys a sense of the separation between past and present with economy and wit. "The ground felt spongy, the chill air moist and penetrating," he observes at Cook's birth site in Yorkshire. "Traffic roared in the distance. An Indian re-entrant wandered just in buckskins, gnawing on a candy bar."

THOMAS STEINBECK

DOWN TO A SOUNDLESS SEA

THOMAS STEINBECK

DOWN TO A SOUNDLESS SEA The Steinbeck literary tradition continues with the stunning debut story collection — set on the rugged Northern California coast — by the son of the great American novelist.

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