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A diplomat in intricate times

iewed by Zawiyah Baba

A DIPLOMAT ARRIVES IN WASHINGTON

By Fauziah Mohamad Taib

Xlibris, pp136

REMINISCENT of the writings of British Residents about Malaysia in the 19th century, *A Diplomat Arrives in Washington* gives us a firsthand account of the impressions of a Malaysian diplomat who worked as a senior official at the Malaysian Embassy in the United States and the institutions, people and work culture of her American counterparts and the diplomatic community in general.

In the opening chapter, *Growing Up With Mrs. Jangan*, the author gives a heartwarming account of her childhood as the youngest in a family of nine children. We learn - with part sympathy and part amusement - how the combination of an over-protective mother and mundane household chores motivated her to join the Foreign Service.

In her speech at the launch of her book by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Fauziah said that writing that chapter enabled her to finally lay the "ghost of her childhood" to rest. She recalled with some misgivings *The Balkan Desk I left Behind* before the Washington assignment.

Interestingly written chapters on *Wisma Putra Women*, *Sexism in the Nation's Capital* and *Mother's Day at Washington Harbor* provide good coverage of gender issues. Her five-year stint in the United States as Deputy Chief of Mission spans 12 chapters of the book. She introduces us to the inner workings of the Malaysian Embassy and its cosmopolitan staff in *Inside the Embassy*, including the rare opportunity to take charge in *Number Two Minds the Store*. The people she meets, the events in the US capital that had worldwide impact, highlights of diplomatic life, her travels and encounters with the great diversity that is the United States make this book an engaging and fascinating read.

One revelation to me was that Washington, being a District of Columbia, does not belong to any State and its citizens are denied the usual legislative rights of ordinary State citizens. Apparently, efforts to make Washington DC the 51st State have so far failed, thus rendering its population literally stateless although they are federal citizens in their own right. Mayor Anthony William's caustic remark reflects the people of Washington's indignation about the denial of their constitutional rights: "There are only three groups of people who are denied voting rights in the United States - children, convicted criminals and citizens of Washington DC."

Fauziah's time in Washington DC coincided with the construction of Malaysia's new embassy building and complex at International Court where many other embassies are housed. I visited the new premises soon after its official opening by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in May 2002, following his historic visit to the White House, and was truly impressed by it. I guess that's why I found the two paragraphs dedicated to it rather detached and spare:

"On a 128,000 square-foot ground on top of a hill, the Malaysian Embassy with its tropical wood trimmings, a big library, cultural and conference facilities, banquet and reception hall, a gym and prayer rooms gave a refreshing sense of purpose and pride to those who worked inside ..."

I wonder if this has do to with what Fauziah said at the end of the book about how diplomats perceive their posts: "People in my profession seldom

get attached to a place, no matter how many good memories they have of them."

Over the five years, Fauziah visited 40 of the 50 states in the US, which is certainly no mean feat. Apart from the fact that she loves travelling and has a keen sense of adventure, she is also blessed with a great sense of curiosity. I enjoyed the descriptions of the places she visited and the people she encountered, and can relate with every delight and wonder which must have inspired the more literary prose in the chapter Beyond the Beltway.

Written in a direct, uncomplicated style, this book makes enjoyable reading. The narration flows smoothly and practically every sentence is interspersed with interesting facts. Indeed this little book is packed with so much information that it would have been well served by an index for quick reference to the nuggets preciously embedded in every chapter.

Fauziah has done Malaysia and the international community at large a great service by sharing her experiences, perceptions and insightful views and feelings on a wide range of subjects. Her highly competent handling of intricate subjects like The Rise and Fall of dot.com Companies, Meeting of Financial Minds, That Morning of September 11, and The Battle for a Legal Presidency reflect the wide knowledge ambassadors must have when representing the country abroad and how versatile they have to be.

I recommend this book to all who enjoy reading creative non-fiction. It is a must-read not only for budding diplomats but also those travelling or representing the country abroad, students and those considering a diplomatic career.

\* Fauziah Mohamad Taib left on Sunday to take up her post as Malaysian high commissioner to Fiji.