

AS I WAS PASSING II



ADIBAH AMIN



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Praise for Adibah Amin's AS I WAS PASSING II

“Adibah Amin writes about real people, people like the *pak cik* down the road, Yin, her teacher-friend, and Mano, the gardener’s little boy. In her inimitable style, she weaves little stories around ordinary folk going through life’s challenges, or as she would put it, their ups and downs. But a common thread binds them all. There is a message, a ‘moral’ if you like, in even the simplest of her tales. That’s what makes her anecdotes so captivating, so enduring.”

Ng Poh Tip

Group Chief Editor

Star Publications (Malaysia) Bhd

“Elegant, gracious, full of affection for her fellow Malaysians, Adibah’s anecdotes give you not only a sense of nostalgia but also a deeper understanding of the way we were.”

Lee Su Kim

author of *Malaysian Flavours*
and *A Nyonya in Texas*

“Adibah has a rare knack for turning the prosaic into amusing anecdotes that appeal to both young and old. Rereading them almost three decades later, I find them just as charming as ever. Her understanding of human nature has rendered those tales into timeless pieces.”

Lydia Teh

author of *Life's Like That*
and *Honk! If You're Malaysian*

“Adibah is at heart an astute anecdotalist, a miniaturist, blessed with a talent for the closely observed detail as well as a keen sense for the foibles of others and a keener sense of humour about her own follies.”

Eric Forbes

Editor



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preface

adibah amin

I WROTE THESE SKETCHES of Malaysian life and musings on various topics in the 1970s, soon after joining the hectic world of newspaper journalism.

When the late Tan Sri Lee Siew Yee, editor-in-chief of the *New Straits Times* then, asked me to write a column for the paper, I was excited and terrified at the same time. As you will read later in this book, I had already learnt to hide behind doors and pounce on potential sources of news stories. But a column!

What would I write about, I asked him. “Things Malaysian,” he said, “and anything else under the sun and beyond.” He felt that readers would like food for thought served with a light touch. I was to relax and just write in my own way.

The column was called ‘As I Was Passing.’ Tan Sri Lee allowed me to use a pseudonym, and I felt braver. I don’t really know why I chose Sri Delima (‘the glow of a ruby’); perhaps it was because I had always loved the gentle warmth of that gem.

Anyway, I wrote from the heart and was reassured when readers wrote me letters, sharing their experiences, thoughts and feelings. The *New Straits Times* published

some of these letters, including those that argued with ferocious wit against my views.

In 1976 and 1978, Berita Publishing, the book and magazine publishing arm of the New Straits Times Group, published selections of the 1970s pieces in two volumes. A few years later, I left the *New Straits Times* to freelance. From time to time, there was talk of reprinting them, but then Berita Publishing itself ceased to exist.

A while ago, I was happy to receive a phone call and a letter from MPH Group Publishing. They said they would like to republish my 1970s collections in two volumes. I was deeply touched to learn that Eric C. Forbes, the editor, had enjoyed reading the column as a teenager back in the swinging and groovy 1970s and felt the articles would still be enjoyable and meaningful for contemporary readers.

If you are too young to remember the 1970s, or were born long after, you may be amused by the contrast between lifestyles then and now. Some aspects of my childhood and teens in the prewar and early postwar years will seem even more 'weird' to you. Yet, you may find surprising similarities. My young friends and students who have read their parents' copies of the 1970s collections say it's 'cool' and 'gross' how things like tuition fever, the generation gap, peer group tyranny, youthful 'crushes' and the 'tender tussle' have remained so much the same despite the passage of time.

Again, if you do remember the 1970s and earlier, you may share my nostalgia for 'the way we were,' smile at memories of childhood games and teenage 'dating' styles, and sigh over the passing of the *pantun*, the

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ronggeng and even more, the old simplicity and warmth. Comparing what we have lost with what we have gained over the years may help us find a happy balance.

Should you be a visitor from another land, you might like to compare your impressions of Malaysia today with my depiction of its yesteryears. I imagine you laughing with me over tourist notions: yours before you came to my colourful multicultural country to see and sense the realities, and mine before I visited yours to begin to understand the complexities.

Whatever your background, I hope you will enjoy 'passing' through these little byways of life with me.



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introduction

eric c. forbes

REMEMBER Sri Delima's *As I Was Passing* way back in the 1970s and early 1980s which started out life as a weekly or biweekly column in the *New Straits Times*? One of the most avidly read columns in the *New Straits Times* then, Adibah Amin wrote her column under the pseudonym Sri Delima ('the glow of a ruby'), observing human nature with an assurance of touch and insight, laced with her signature wry humour and humanity, without the slightest hint of sentimentality.

However, it's such a crying shame that *As I Was Passing Vols. 1* (1976) and *2* (1978), published collections of the columns, have been out of print for more than 25 years despite their overwhelming popularity and relevance.

It is a sin to waste good newspaper columns. Columns that are well written and insightful are always worth rereading, which is why they are still popular when compiled into books, among which are both volumes of Adibah Amin's *As I Was Passing* and such recent examples as Lee Su Kim's *Malaysian Flavours: Insights into Things Malaysian* (1996) and Lydia Teh's *Life's Like That: Scenes from Malaysian Life* (2004). Teh

remembers first reading *As I Was Passing* way back in the 1970s when she was a teenager: “Adibah has a rare knack for turning the prosaic into amusing anecdotes that appeal to both young and old. Rereading them almost three decades later, I find them just as charming as ever. Her understanding of human nature has rendered those tales into timeless pieces.” Lee remembers looking forward to reading Adibah’s column every week during her schooldays. “Today, Adibah’s books are still as delightfully enjoyable and enduring. Elegant, gracious, full of affection for her fellow Malaysians, her anecdotes give you not only a sense of nostalgia but also a deeper understanding of the way we were. She has written two books for all Malaysians to cherish, and in turn, books that inspire Malaysians to treasure our beautiful and unique multicultural heritage.”

Book compilations also give readers an opportunity to catch up on the columns they missed for one reason or another and to reread the pieces they enjoyed reading the first time. Books such as those by Adibah are well worth reprinting for a new generation of readers who have not read them because they are evergreen in terms of cultural and moral values, humour, local nuances, etc. Those among us who have read them in the 1970s will find them an enjoyable walk down memory lane.

Adibah’s finely wrought prose, beautiful in its concision, deftly captures the quirks and idiosyncrasies of Malaysians. She makes us laugh at our all-too-human frailties, our vanities, our obsessions, and the oddities of Malaysian culture (or lack thereof). She is especially adept at observing and capturing the nuances of mundane

life and all the subtle contradictions buried beneath the stoic exterior of Malaysians. The wondrous real-life stories that she spins will engage and grip you with the clarity of her honesty and introspection. Adibah wrote in the 1970s, “We [Malaysians] have become hypersensitive, getting offended at the merest hint of criticism. We are fast losing a most precious gift: the ability to laugh at ourselves.” She continues, “There was a time not long ago when it seemed we could never laugh again. But soon the jokes went round—a little bitter, but deeply healing. They helped us to see our weaknesses and to start afresh.” Looks like we haven’t changed much since the 1970s: in fact, some of us would say that we have gotten worse, what with the culture of excess and consumption permeating our lives today.

By mining her own life for material, these volumes at times read like Adibah’s memoir. She has a good eye for detail. The details of the 1970s are recounted so realistically that anyone today will be able to identify with them. Ask anyone about what they recall most about the 1970s, all you’ll hear about are the ghastly fashion sense, platform shoes, horrible hairstyles, the unspeakable disco music, *Fanfare*, *Movie News*, *New Thrill*, ABBA conquering the world of pop music, David Bowie, Donny and Marie, Teresa Carpio, *Charlie’s Angels*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Star Wars*, campy disaster “classics” like *The Poseidon Adventure*, *Earthquake* and *The Towering Inferno*, etc. However, one of the most wonderful memories of the kitschy 1970s was Sri Delima’s column, “As I Was Passing,” which I read

eagerly when it made its appearance without fail in the *New Straits Times* on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Though Malay is her mother-tongue, her “gut language,” Adibah excels in the English language. “We spoke very little English at home. My mother was a freedom fighter against the British and didn’t want us to speak English. She spoke only Malay to us, gave us Malay books [to read] and sent us to Malay and Arabic schools.” Later, when she was 10, she attended an English-medium school where students were permitted to speak English only. At the beginning, she struggled, but the books—with their fascinating pictures—captivated her. She now says: “I love English. You can do anything with it. I love its unruliness. The rules are not rigid. I don’t even mind the crazy spelling. I wouldn’t want it reformed. Of course, it depends on how it’s used. It can be horribly pompous. Still, I love Malay more. When I write anything in depth, it turns out to be in Malay. In English, I write in a light-hearted way because it’s my second language and I don’t like trying too hard. It’s not as good as I want it to be.” But, of course, we know she’s just being modest. She writes in English with such effortless skill and empathy, and has an eye and ear attending to every detail, every nuance of idiom and character. Though light in texture, Adibah’s prose is very filling.

What a joy it is to be able to reread such a smorgasbord of Malaysiana at their very best! The new volumes of *As I Was Passing* chronicle and celebrate the Malaysian way of life. In these delightful, inventive collage of anecdotal essays, Adibah looks into the heart

and soul of Malaysia, past and present, with delicious humour and through crisp prose. She dissects the Malaysian psyche and its quirks and idiosyncrasies with relish and abandonment. In particular, her memories of her childhood and the redolence of the Malaysian household will warm you from the inside out.

Despite dabbling in so many areas of writing, Adibah is at heart an astute anecdotalist, a miniaturist, blessed with a talent for the closely observed detail as well as a keen sense for the foibles of others and a keener sense of humour about her own follies. There is much joy in her use of both the English and Malay languages, imbued as they are with rich morsels of descriptive writing. Her affection for Malaysia and Malaysians comes through clearly even as she pokes fun at them.

Though humorous, her wealth of intriguing stories also bristle with a tinge of a lament for lost times. And by immersing herself in the Malaysian experience, she has distilled with nitric intensity the essence of being Malaysian. If you need one book that captures the essence of what it is to be Malaysian or some idea of Malaysianness, you won't go wrong with this one.

The republishing of neglected Malaysian classics such as these volumes should be welcomed with open arms. I once enjoyed reading them as a teenager growing up in the 1970s. Surprisingly, I still enjoyed rereading them after all these years. I hope they do the same for you too.





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