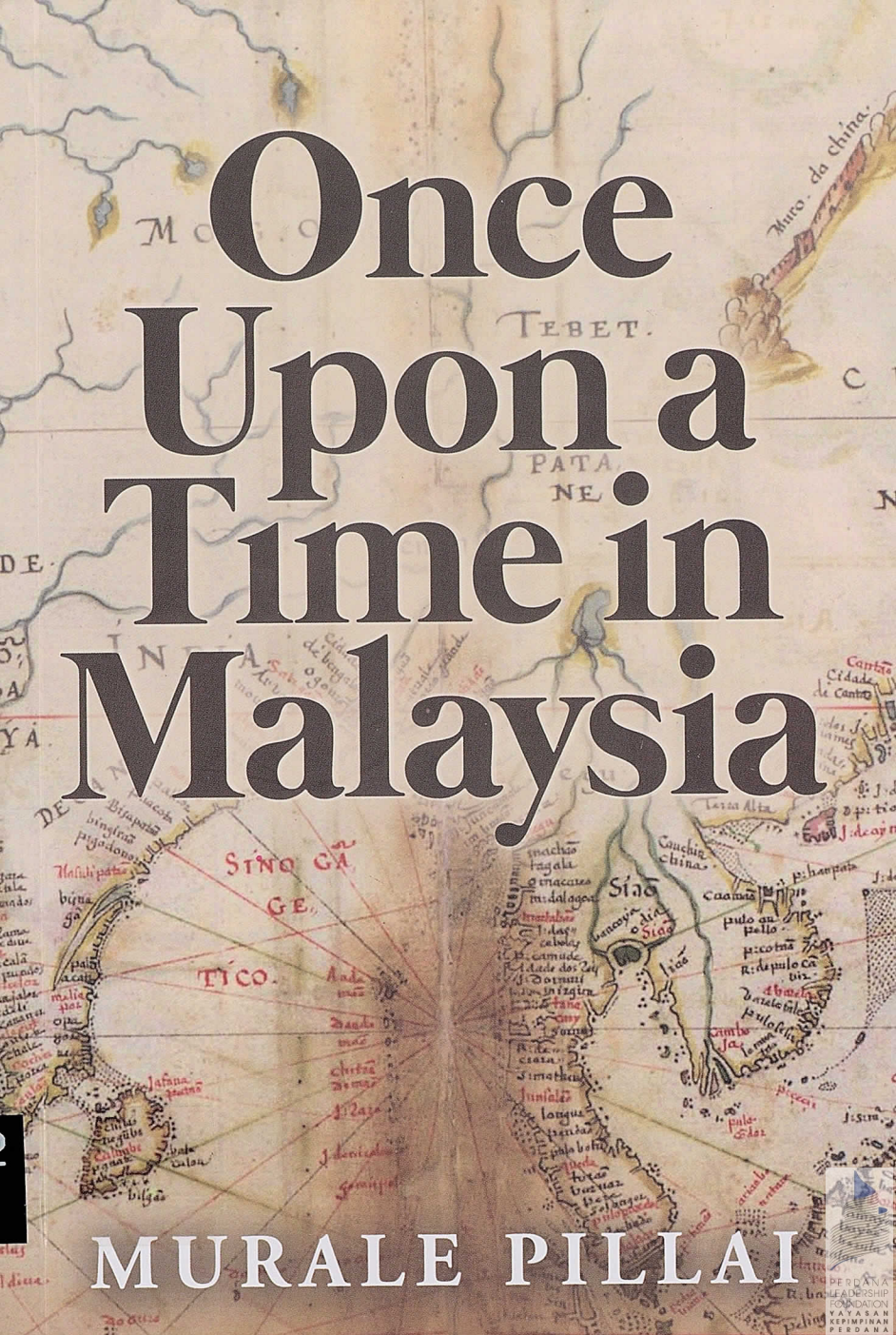
Once Upon a Time in Malaysia



MURALE PILLAI

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Once Upon a Time in Malaysia

Murale Pillai

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'Sehari selembar benang, lama-lama menjadi kain'

Boas festas! Boas festas! Christmas celebrations and New Year festivities! In boisterous Lisbon it was hard to tell when the former ended and the latter began with all the singing, dancing and merrymaking. Lamb on the spit, roast pork, and fish cooked over open fires were washed down with copious amounts of wine and ale, amid much laughter and loud conversation. Undeterred by the seasonal winter rains, large crowds also lined the cobbled thoroughfares of the city to cheer the arriving royals, cardinals, ministers and diplomats. Their magnificent coaches rumbled towards the recently-renovated Ribeiro Palace to usher in the new year as honoured guests of King Manuel I of Portugal and the Algarve, while others, arriving by sea, disembarked at a wharf with a built-in ornate staircase that took them directly to the palace from the Tagus River, now in full swell.

At the palace they were feted with an array of fine foods and wines. After nightfall, a troupe of performers sang one *vilancete* after another, while the stylish and much adored man of letters, Gil Vicente, read out a long lyric poem, keeping everyone in high spirits. At midnight, a hushed

But Manuel believed that gold and slaves were not enough to secure the long-term wealth and well-being of his country. He was certain that his country's future lay in the maritime trade in spices, especially since the Silk Route was slowly disintegrating following the depredations of Timur and his successors.

Early in his reign, Manuel created the Casa da Índia to regulate all international trade and administer Portugal's territories, colonies and factories across Africa, India, and the rest of Asia. Later came his single-minded decision to merge the Casa da Guiné e Mina, a holdover from the days of Henry the Navigator, with Casa da Índia after Vasco da Gama's ground-breaking voyage to the subcontinent. This decision began to pay dividends almost immediately. Running parallel with this brilliant reorganisation was the greater objective of establishing a Portuguese *mare clausum*, giving the country total control of the seas on which her ships sailed or would be sailing.

In keeping with his ambitions for Portugal, Manuel went on a building spree. The old Royal Alcosova Palace, located on a hill within the precincts of Sao Jorge Castle, was too cramped for the work-life balance he cherished. He commissioned the construction of a new palace complex, the impressive Ribeira Palace, by the bank of the Tagus River, taking advantage of the fact that Lisbon, now a major Renaissance city, had one of the finest riverports of Europe. Situated next to the new palace were the shipyards of Ribeira das Naus, where the great ships that roamed the oceans were built. Most of the major Lisbon trading houses were located just a stone's throw away. Manuel next moved the Casa da

India to the imposing Tower of the King in Ribeira Palace to oversee its operations. The newly constructed wharfs on the Tagus allowed ships to unload their precious cargo directly onto a large commercial square next to the palace, making it a port, a trade centre and a financial hub. Manuel was certain his life's work would mark a glorious period in Portuguese history.

And now, after two years of planning and hard work, they were weeks away from sending an armada to Malacca to break the spice trade monopoly of the Arabs and Venetians. At the first meeting to discuss the 'Malacca Question', only a few captains and high officials of Casa da India were convinced an armada could sail beyond India to Malacca, the leading spice entrepot in the East. Held in a large room that housed the Division of Maps within the Tower of the King, the meeting went on for hours as they weighed the pros and cons of such a mission. The room was tightly guarded. Hanging from a ceiling was the secret Padrão Real—a cartographic masterpiece of unequalled value and a testament to Portuguese daring, vision and imagination. The Padrão Real, a work in progress from the time of Henry the Navigator, included the complete record of Portuguese voyages of discovery, both public and secret. To aid and ensure the success of the various voyages and missions, ship captains and admirals were issued smaller maps related to their area of operations derived from the much larger Padrão Real.

In that long meeting, as with all other meetings he convened, the king let his ministers take turns to speak and express their views freely. Manuel spoke last, choosing each word carefully to ensure there was no mistaking his intentions,

and perhaps to make clear that his was the final say on all matters. Towards the end of their discussions, he got up from his chair and walked towards a window with a clear view of the Tagus. Looking out at the shipyards and wharfs, he reminded himself of the immense risks and expenses of launching an armada of four armed galleons to Malacca, half a world away from Lisbon. Turning to the men seated around an old oak table he said: "No risk, no reward! I approve of the Mission to Malacca. Gentlemen, we shall go there!"

The plan was as bold as it was imaginative: first the Atlantic and Africa and then to Cochin on the Malabar coast, to touch base with the new governor-general of Portuguese India, Admiral Francisco de Almeida, by following the sailing routes established by da Gama a few years earlier. Since then, the route had been well-charted and well-worked, in terms of local contacts and resources needed to replenish stocks and supplies, including running repairs of every kind to both ships and sailors. The four ships would then make a speedy dash across the Indian Ocean to enter the northern end of the straits separating Sumatra and the Golden Chersonese using the southwest trade winds, which the Arabs called *mausam*. They would make stops along the way at other smaller Malay ports before arriving in Malacca, in a show of force that would make negotiations for a favourable trade deal that much easier. That, in a nutshell, was the Portuguese grand strategy to first break the monopoly and then corner the trade in spices—without going to war. "War is Plan B," said the king's naval adviser, an admiral with skin the colour of dark brown clay and eyes that glinted with guile as he stroked his long scraggly beard with a wistful smile.

But the biggest challenge was choosing the right *capitão* for the mission. Though great pains were always taken to select a team of expert navigators, sailors and technicians to support him, the success of any mission ultimately depended on the captain. His decision-making skills had to be of the first order, not to mention the tact he had to possess to deal with native kings and rajahs—as they had learned at high cost in India. The *capitão* must be able to exercise the soft skills of a diplomat to project the power of the armada without making native rulers feel threatened or coerced. As captain, he must not yield his ground on matters pertaining to the Catholic faith, yet must at the same time, be aware of the sensitivities surrounding issues of race, religion and local politics. But above all, the *capitão* must be a true leader of the men under his command. To a man, they must obey him come rain or shine, through tempest or raging storm. And they must be prepared to meet the fate of a watery death in carrying out his instructions. For these sailors, *marinheiros*, the rewards for such loyalty and steadfastness were a share of the booty, a promotion to officer or magistrate, as well as national fame and honour. But the rewards for the *capitão* were far larger—royal recognition in the form of appointments to head new missions, elevation to the ranks of nobility, a bonus paid in gold, and perhaps even a gift of a large landed estate, complete with a grand manor.

The king was keenly aware of the intense competition among his leading captains. He reminded them: "Competition is a good thing. The most talented must come to the fore in the service of a grateful nation." Manuel himself fostered such rivalry, but under his watchful eyes it had remained fair

and ethical. He also valued teamwork highly, and expected servants of the crown to work together, however difficult the circumstances or strained their personal relationships. But at any given time, there were only a handful of undeployed captains around. This sometimes necessitated a recall of senior officers to the Casa da Índia for redeployment, through the arduous method of sending out a ship to bring them home. All present at that first meeting agreed that the selection of a *capitão* for the Mission to Malacca should be deferred, closer to the sailing date. Now days into the new year, the decision could not be put off any longer. After many sleepless nights sitting alone in his study lit by a single small candle, Manuel had his man.

Days later, in the third week of the new year—in the very same room they held their first meeting, the Division of Maps in the Tower of the King—Manuel quietly announced his choice to the men gathered around the old oak table. The *fidalgo*, Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, the soft-spoken, forty-four-year-old *capitão* from Alandroal within the rough province of Alentejo, would lead the Mission to Malacca. De Sequeira had a stolid record of managing Portugal's new possessions in Africa. He was neither dashing nor ruthless, but enjoyed a reputation as an experienced officer who cared deeply for the welfare of the men under his command. He was more happy at sea than anywhere else on earth. "He suffers from land-sickness whenever he is on *terra firma*," his fellow officers joked behind his back. Then came the obligatory quick checks on de Sequeira's health, debts and views on team selection. Also checked was whether he was a regular church-goer, and the company he kept when on shore leave.

All of these matters were attended to quickly, given the tight timelines they were working on. When eventually summoned to the Ribeira Palace, the inscrutable de Sequeira displayed no emotion other than to bow low and softly utter ever so often, "*Obrigado, obrigado.*"

The king impressed upon de Sequeira that the mission was delicate, but was of immense strategic value. He was told that Venice and the Arabs had monopolised the eastern spice trade for too long, that the ocean was a faster and better alternative to the overland Silk Route, and that the Ming emperors in China were strictly enforcing their isolationist policy, aiming to tightly seal the country from all contact with the West. The *capitão* listened patiently, noticing his monarch's pale, ascetic face, dominated by a pair of large, dark eyes that seemed cold and impassive, wondering what his swarthy, tanned sailors would think of this man who, in all probability, hated the sun. But the minutes passed, and de Sequeira was handed an official letter of appointment, spelling out all the dos and the don'ts of the mission. Manuel's parting words were that he could sleep well now. "As always, I will give it my all," replied the old seadog with a deep bow. Shown out to the large commercial square by two uniformed guards, de Sequeira found the heat of the brilliant afternoon sun a welcome relief. Well-dressed officials, officers in braided uniforms and cockaded hats, smug merchants in their carriages and well-heeled traders were moving about in every direction of the square, as they went about the business of profiting from an empire with far-flung possessions, trading stations and factories.

Next came the difficult work of ensuring the four galleons

were seaworthy. "No expense must be spared in this regard," insisted de Sequeira, mindful that many of the sailors on these ships would be mere lads from the dusty farms and villages of Portugal. The *capitão* was also on the lookout for the latest devices or navigation tools he could employ on this mission. He had a sharp eye for detail, inspecting every plank and rope of the four ships to ensure they could withstand the rigours of a long sea voyage. Cannons and guns were similarly inspected and appraised, for these ships were, in truth, heavily armed merchantmen. De Sequeira also insisted on an ample supply of citrus fruits, the curative effects of which were shown by da Gama and Pedro Álvares Cabral. He also heeded the advice of a fellow captain, an old hand who had served in the Red Sea ports, that calico clothing would do well in the Indian Ocean.

De Sequeira then made preparations to secure the latest information on sailing conditions in the Indian Ocean at different times of the year, by requesting access to maritime records—including commentaries on the weather, frequency of storms and other adverse events of previous voyages to India. Next on his list was to seriously study the sailing tables prepared by the royal astronomer, Abraham Zacuto. These tables were now available in almanac form, making it easier to use—especially in the seas approaching the Equator, where the Pole Star disappears into the horizon and cannot be used to locate one's latitude. "Better still if Zacuto himself could hold a training session for us!" exclaimed the thoughtful-looking *capitão*, running his fingers through his hair. He knew Zacuto was still in the pay and favour of the king. Besides, the astronomer had done similar work for da Gama

on his first voyage to India.

By April 1508, both crew and ships were ready for the long voyage to Malacca. They eagerly awaited the *Nortada*, the coastal winds blowing in from the north Atlantic, to gather enough momentum to carry them towards the Equator. Days later, judging the winds sufficient, they sailed out of Lisbon, flags and pennants fluttering stiffly in the early morning breeze amid the shrill blasts of trumpets and the lusty cheering of crowds, as the king, courtiers, nobles and priests watched from the square, crossing their hearts and whispering silent prayers. The estimated time of arrival in Malacca was July 1509.

"That is, if all goes well," the *capitão* wrote in his personal diary.


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'Hendak seribu daya,
tak hendak seribu dalih'

Malacca, half a world away from Lisbon, awaited the monsoon like no other place on earth. The days slowly turned into weeks as the city roiled in the tropical heat. Irritable and edgy, people spent less and less time outdoors. They took longer afternoon naps. But that did not stop everyone from endlessly complaining about the heat or the humidity. And as water wells dried out and trees shed their leaves, older folks looked up to the heavens, insisting the air felt different. Then passing squalls, peals of thunder and fierce flashes of lightning heralded the arrival of the monsoon. The city heaved a huge sigh of collective relief. The first trading ships docked at her port, riding the winds and waves of the southwest monsoon. Merchants and traders thoughtfully rubbed their chins, working out in their heads the risks and rewards of the deals they will undertake this trading season. By the time the rains turn into a daily deluge, both banks of the narrow Malacca River up to the *jambatan besar*, the main wooden bridge connecting the two throbbing halves of the city, were crowded with trading ships and boats of every sail and hull—ancient Javanese *djong*, single-masted Sumatran

perahu, stately Chinese junks, sturdy Indian merchantmen, narrow-hulled Yemeni *dhow*, flat-bottomed Peguan rice barges, lateen-sailed Arab *baghlah* and ornate Siamese trading ships—from the Nusantara and beyond.

In the *kampung* within the city, bare-bodied children screamed and shouted "*Hujan! Hujan!*" as they ran about in delight, their hands outstretched to catch raindrops while their mothers dashed out to bring in the clothes hung to dry. Within days, the dust and dirt of the hot, dry months washed away into the drains and canals across the city. Filled to the brim, they were flowing clear again. Older children swam and frolicked for hours on end in the larger canals, the water turned cool and refreshing. From the veranda of their houses, fronting the Malacca River, men cast their lines using long bamboo poles and waited patiently for fish to bite, as they had done for centuries, as the womenfolk prepared the evening meal of rice and grilled fish, served with a *sambal* made of dried prawns and a condiment brought over recently—chillies—by merchants from India, who themselves claimed it had been brought to their shores from elsewhere. "It's nice hot stuff," they said with a twinkle in their eyes and a lively shaking of their heads.

As the city soaked up yet more rain, trees along its numerous paths, roads and thoroughfares drip with moisture, while the *dusun* that supply the city with fruits and vegetables were flush with new shoots and leaves of every hue of green, yellow and purple. Basking in daily rain and sunshine, the once dull and dry thatched roofs of the numerous dwellings of the *rakyat jelata* turned full-bodied and deep brown like its occupants. The public buildings in the vicinity of the sultan's

large wooden palace glistened in the golden rays of the brazen sun that appeared high in the sky after every shower. Amid the large stones and boulders along the shore, now washed clean by the rains, younger couples and lovers met at sunset to whisper sweet nothings in the evening breeze, as the day turned into a twilight of moving shadows and vague forms, which for some unearthly reason excited them even more.

And in the approaching darkness of a tropical night, the glow of numerous lanterns hung on the bobbing boats crowding the riverfront swirl and writhed in the thick moist air, casting an eerie spell upon land and sea. As nightfall slowly crowded out the hustle and bustle of the day, a silence descended upon the city, save for the sound of chirping cicadas, crying infants, the snoring of old men and the gentle wash of the waves in the becalmed waters of the Straits of Malacca.

Every morning, as the sun rose over the Nusantara, the locals went about their tasks with renewed vigour, filled with hope and optimism now that the port was crowded with ships. There was work aplenty, but nowhere was this energy more evident than in the merchant houses, markets, shops and store fronts along the banks of the narrow river that divided the city. On any day of the week, the thriving and often chaotic markets of Malacca were witness to bargaining and bantering, auctions and arguments, trade fairs and trade shows, dealing and dithering, fights and fisticuffs, breaches of contract and broken promises, arriving merchants and departing trade envoys—the daily tumult of a city at the epicentre of the international trade in spices, precious goods

and other rarities sourced from afar. Year after year, this burgeoning trade made the merchants of Malacca among the richest in the East.

As the southwest monsoon peaked, even more ships arrived to unload their cargo at her crowded wharfs. More deals would be struck, payments made in cash or kind, and profits pocketed by honouring the bargain and following the rules of the game. But there were among them, as with any large entrepot, a class of sly traders, shady wheeler-dealers and well-connected con-men who made the rounds whispering the latest news on palace politics, real or imagined. They spread misinformation and rumours, resorted to name-dropping to get a cut, commission or bribe, or collected illegal payments to circumvent a rule or regulation that governed traders and trade practices in the city.

But there was no denying the extraordinary abilities of the merchants of Malacca. They moved pepper from Pasai and Pedir in the north of Sumatra to Jeddah and Aden in Arabia, and cardamom from Malabar to Mandalay and Ayutthaya. Silk and porcelain from China was transhipped to India and every other port of Nusantara, even as far as the islands of the Visayas. Exotic and precious cargo, including birds' nests and *trepang* also found their way here, sourced by intrepid traders from the remote islands beyond Java, who guarded the secrets of their trade with their lives to enjoy high margins. Then there were the pearls from Sulawesi, mother-of-pearls from Timor, diamonds from the Golconda mines in India, rubies and emeralds from Ava, and feathers of the birds of paradise from Papua, fit to adorn the crown of a powerful raja. This was the magic of Malacca.

Intra-Nusantara trade was booming, and so was the carrying trade between India and China, as the city was perfectly placed in terms of both distance and time to tap into the two monsoon systems that push and pull the wind and the rains at the Equator twice every year—the trade winds of the southwest and the northeast monsoons. Malacca's cosmopolitan markets, a product of both geography and clever politics, were the envy of her neighbours. The Tamil word for the initial funds to get a deal moving, *mudhal* becomes the Malay *modal* to describe business capital in all its forms. And wherever they come from, these traders all know that the hardest part of starting a business is to raise *modal* through sheer hard work, unless one is lucky enough to inherit a great fortune.

To facilitate this large volume of trade, the money men and merchants devised a binding network of promissory notes for payments and bills of exchange for enforcing contracts made in the presence of witnesses. For short-term financing and factoring, there is 'one day money', a recent innovation. There was also a lively trade in currency, with the swapping of gold, silver, copper and tin coins originating from different ports and trading cities of the East. Merchants who were considered 'old hands' determined the rate of exchange between coins, carefully examining the authenticity and condition of each. Arab gold *dirham*, Indian gold and copper coins, and Chinese silver coins were very much in demand.

Like any busy entrepot, there was extensive recording and book-keeping in Malacca. The sound of the abacus could be heard all day from the merchants in the Chinese quarter. They

were among the wealthiest in the city, but made homes out of the parts of their shophouses not used for business. On other streets, merchants pored and peered over their ledgers, scribbling as they do the mental maths of the risks involved in any new deal or trade. "The business of Malacca is business," said Luang, an old merchant from Ayutthaya, with a wry smile. His line of trade was selling rice produced in the fertile Menam valley to the Arabs in Malacca, who in turn exported it to Hormuz, where Persian merchants hauled it to the great bazaars of Isfahan and Baghdad, by way of camel caravans, once in summer and once in winter.

In the Indian Quarter, the incessant noise and the chatter of merchants could not stop the scent and smell of spices from rising into the air and wafting across the cityscape. Men in white muslin shirts and colourful *pulicat* sarongs gesture and nod their heads vigorously as they bargained over the value of the newly arrived consignments of pepper, anistar, cardamom, cinnamon, aniseed, asafoetida, fenugreek and dried chillies. Other shops are crammed with bronze sculptures of idols, cooking utensils of brass, grinding stones and earthenware of every description, from handleless drinking cups to huge pots that can cook a meal to feed hundreds in a *kenduri*. On Friday evenings, men and women gathered at the temple to the sound of bells and conches. The air is filled with smoke from burning camphor and incense. And the flowers adorning the hair-buns of womenfolk in their graceful sarees, walking home from the temple, left a scented trail of sweet jasmine and red roses.

In the Arab Quarter, men in long cotton *jalabiya* and women in loose *abaya* with matching headscarves walked

about the twisted footpaths and walkways in the still afternoon air, seemingly impervious to the heat of the sun. They lived in tight-knit families in houses made of stone and sea coral. Their shops were small and dark, preferring to lure in potential customers by telling them about the items on sale but seldom on display. When sufficient interest was shown, they went to great lengths to describe the merits of the object—a dagger made from Damascus steel, an unguent, a vial of perfume, a bottle of the attar of roses, or even a dainty tray of *baklava*. Raising money through donations, they built themselves two stone mosques of similar design at both ends of the quarter, but with modest domes. Come rain or shine, a *bilal* called the faithful to prayer five times a day.

The Malays of Malacca and the kindred peoples of the Nusantara were not confined to a quarter. They lived in *kampung* large and small within the fast-growing city and beyond. Amid fruit trees and small garden plots, they raised chickens and ducks, and earned their living as fishermen, petty traders, suppliers of jungle produce, craftsmen and seasonal workers at the ports, and even on large public works, like building and maintaining the sultan's palaces and high officers' mansions, clearing old and cutting new drains and canals, maintaining walkways and public spaces, as well as piling and shore restoration works along the coast and riverbanks. Such works kept both the officials tasked with awarding these projects and the contractors who executed them happy, well-fed and prosperous. Among the leading contractors was a chieftain, Ahmad Ali, who amassed a huge fortune in a very short time, attracting both envy and fame in equal measure.

'A well-researched, evocative satire of historical Malacca at its peak before its fall. It bears a surprising relevance and resemblance to the present. Compelling reading. Brilliant.'

P Gunasegaram

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'A delightful read...provides valuable lessons from our past, to show how similar our present foibles are.'

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'Fascinating from start to finish!'

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It's Toffee's Turn

Life in 16th-century Malacca—as it is in Malaysia today—was centred on power and politics, trade and commerce, rivalry and strife, race and religion, and war and peace. As the leading entrepot of the Nusantara, Malacca grew rich and prosperous. Then things took a familiar turn. The political ethos of the inward-looking and self-serving ruling elite had begun to change for the worse. Bent on enjoying the trappings of wealth and power, they ignored the needs and well-being of the *rakyat* and the State. At the same time, a resurgent Portugal, driven by science and ambition, was the superpower of the day. She could project power and dictate the course of history in most parts of the known world. Malacca was totally unprepared for the Portuguese 'Mission to Malacca' in 1509 led by Admiral de Sequeira. The subsequent ill-advised taking of some Portuguese as hostages and the retreat of de Sequeira's fleet led to Afonso de Albuquerque's ferocious invasion in 1511, which ends in a shattering defeat for Malacca, leaving in its wake an enduring sense of loss and a legacy of deep distrust for the 'other'. As a work of historical fiction, *Once Upon A Time In Malaysia* is a stark reminder that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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