



The Face: Strangers on a Pier

Tash Aw

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LA Times Book Prize Finalist: The Christopher Isherwood Prize for Autobiographical Prose

“Tash Aw’s *The Face*, so wise and so well done, made me wish it were much longer than it is.”

—Chimamanda Adichie, *The Guardian's* Best Books of 2016

From the award-winning author of *Five Star Billionaire* and *The Harmony Silk Factory* comes a whirlwind personal history of modern Asia, as told through his Malaysian and Chinese heritage.

In *The Face: Strangers on a Pier*, acclaimed author Tash Aw explores the panoramic cultural vitality of modern Asia through his own complicated family story of migration and adaptation, which is reflected in his own face. From a taxi ride in present-day Bangkok, to eating Kentucky Fried Chicken in 1980s Kuala Lumpur, to his grandfathers’ treacherous boat journeys to Malaysia from mainland China in the 1920s, Aw weaves together stories of insiders and outsiders, images from rural villages to megacity night clubs, and voices in a dizzying variety of languages, dialects, and slangs, to create an intricate and astoundingly vivid portrait of a place caught between the fast-approaching future and a past that won’t let go.

Alternately philosophical, funny, personal, political, and poetic, the short memoirs in The Face series offer unique perspectives from some of our favorite writers. Find out more at www.restlessbooks.com/the-face.

The Face: Strangers on a Pier Details

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Memoir

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From Reader Review *The Face: Strangers on a Pier* for online ebook

Mieer Darwesh says

Love all his books. With this one I had a personal attachment.

Jen says

Wow. This little book of essays has blown me away. A. discussion of identity and multiculturalism and how that impacts us and how we relate to other people. While the focus is on his experience in Asia, I feel like it's also very similar to the American experience. How do I relate to my grandparents, children of immigrants, when my life has been so completely different? When the author explains that he can be mistaken for multiple nationalities throughout Asia, it reminds me of how we too have shed our origin story in some way.

Lauren says

This essay - part of a larger multi-author series all entitled *The Face* from Relentless Books - explores both the physical and historical face of the writers. This essay, by Tash Aw impressed me so much that I want to read more of his work, as well as the others in this series of essays.

In six succinct chapters/mini-essays, Tash Aw recounts cultural and ethnic history, both his own, and post-colonial southeast Asia, as well as his ancestry in Taiwan and China. He speaks of the classifications and identifications - putting people in boxes - that he experiences every day. People always asking where he is from, or assuming that they know based on his skin, *his face*, his accent. In Thailand, he is mistaken for Thai, in his childhood home of Malaysia, he is surrounded by Cantonese diaspora, but also of the rising Asia, growing nationalism and identity with new nations, and the newly-minted "middle class".

Kuala Lumpur's Twin Towers referenced in the book as the author looks out from his home, conversing with his father.

It was a fascinating and illuminating read. Right after I finished this book, I sought out his other books.

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Read for Book Riot's 2016 Read Harder Challenge - an author from Southeast Asia

Chloe says

I feel like I am greatly biased towards this particular piece simply because I can relate to it greatly.

interno storie says

Cina-Malesia: biglietto di sola andata. «I miei nonni. Stranieri smarriti sul molo». Una vita tutta da riordinare anche nel quartiere in cui abitano connazionali, governati da una solida etica dell'accoglienza, una città straniera e familiare al tempo stesso.

Ma in questa vicenda entra a gamba tesa la Storia. Il conflitto tra il Kuomintang e il Partito Comunista, la miriade di dialetti, le macerie dell'Impero, che negli anni successivi è stato fabbrica e ha alimentato l'immaginario collettivo di una cinematografia opulenta.

«Da dove vieni?»: è la domanda frequente che viene rivolta all'autore. I tratti somatici e l'accento si mimetizzano nel paesaggio culturale dell'Asia. Sono un impostore, dice, in fin dei conti uno straniero.

Fulminante saggio. my blog

X. says

This book is about a fantasy of neutrality. It's a fantasy that many privileged people share, in different forms.

It is not a unique fantasy at all.

This book is for a Western audience, not for a Malaysian (or for a Singaporean...yours truly) one.

Michèle Velthuisen says

A little gem for global nomads.

Didi says

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6b_S...

Jeslyn says

Being born and bred in Southeast Asia, this little memoir/essay hit me as an uncomfortable truth - something I needed to know. In this book Tash Aw answered all the questions in my head - which I had subconsciously rendered "not important enough" and so didn't bother to throw it out to my parents or grandparents, or to simply find out.

By the end of it, I found myself wishing that there is more depth to it. To make me want to find out more, I think *The Faces: Strangers on a Pier* had succeeded. This is an illuminating read.

Seongkyul says

Read this on the plane back to the States. Read it again tonight. An essay type chapbook, reading this brought back that itch to tell my own version of it... also made me feel proud to be Asian and to be working in Southeast Asia, Asia the continent of kaleidoscopic diversity, complexity, richness. This publisher though (restless books)... suchhh gooddd workkk.

Sylvia says

I am an absolute fan of this series by Restless Books and Tash Aw's take on it is absolutely wonderful and moving. Scenes in a taxi, a conversation with his father and memories from high school trigger a deeper conversation on immigration, human condition and so much more.

An excellent read for today's students.

Karen says

I'm loving this series of short nonfiction books from Restless Books. It's a great premise--get authors from different backgrounds to write an essay (a kind of essay novella, or essayette) that is notionally about their face, but that extends out from that territory to whatever the author chooses to explore. Each book is titled "The Face," but authors append their own subtitles, according to what they do with the concept.

Aw's subtitle is "Strangers on a Pier," and he uses his essay to explore the strange experience of having a "pan-Asian" face, a face that makes people from all over Asia claim him for their own, whether he's in Tibet or Jakarta. He then leaps away to discuss his actual heritage--Malaysian Chinese--and the experiences of his immigrant forebears, the titular "strangers on a pier." This is a short book but it's packed full of personal memories and insights, as well as historical perspective on immigrant and post-immigrant experiences (first generation, second generation, the generation that comes home and says "hi dude" to the uncle-by-association who helped care for the kids while the parents were working three jobs.)

It's also a fascinating meditation on how class develops and divides us. Aw is of one of the first generations of post-colonial Malaysians, born into a country struggling to build its own identity, economy, and elite. It's fascinating and sad to see how that plays for Aw and his fellow students, as they grow up and slowly become aware of the social tracks on which they're destined to run.

Sophia Ramos says

CD, for me this one kind of fell short of the prompt, but was nonetheless enthralling. I've always been curious about the cultural divide in Malaysia, and ultimately like how Tash brought it to the table for me.

Jessica says

Lovely essay from Tash Aw about trying to understand his own identity, heritage and realizing that the distances between generations can sometime stretch wider when you're in an immigrant family.

Diana says

Received this very interesting little book by Tash Aw yesterday ... It's tiny, just essay length really, although very engagingly written. Tash Aw is, of course, famous Malaysian author of *Harmony Silk Factory*, *Map of the Invisible World* and *Five Star Billionaire*, and needs no introduction from me. This is a non-fiction piece of Aw's musings on his heritage as a Malaysian Chinese. He talks about the experience of being a Malaysian Chinese in the West, in Asia, and at home in Malaysia. He delves into his past, the journey that brought his grandfather to this country, his father's personal history, and his own experiences at school in KL, in his grandparents' home in Ipoh, and during his stay in China.

This book barely took me 30 minutes to read, but so much of it spoke to me and brought home the fact that, as Aw says, we know so little of that process that brings us to where our current generation is today, geographically, intellectually, culturally and in our social standing. We're disconnected from the dirt-poor (yet deeply-treasured) origins that our forefathers never forgot, we've lost so much of our own cultural and ancestral heritage, because the bitterness of the past meant our parents taught us to look so hard into the future that we were never given the chance to look back into the murky desperation of history.

I wish this book was an actual full-length book, and Aw would expand further on the musings in this tiny volume. The writing is so smooth and mellifluous that I'm kicking myself for never having checked out his books before now. Now that I've read *The Face: Strangers on a Pier*, it's forced me to acknowledge why books based on Chinese / Malaysian history aren't in my usual reading repertoire. An exploration of our cultural past is inevitably a painful one: in Aw's words, "hardship and homesickness and melancholy and longing" are inextricably part of the heritage of Malaysian Chinese. That way lies too many dragons. There are too many ugly truths and stark realities that I try very hard to escape from, and precisely what I try to hide from when I read.

Read this highly-recommended book, then explore the other titles in Restless Books' *The Face* series - a truly avantgarde collection of personal nonfiction titles by some of the best modern writers. The first releases, by Tash Aw, Ruth Ozeki and Chris Abani, are out this month. Future releases will include stories from Roxane Gay and Lynne Tillman.
