

# Southeast Asian Literatures

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(A highly selective sample based on my classroom use and experiences)

### **Regional:**

George E. Dutton, Editor, *Voices of Southeast Asia: Essential Readings from Antiquity to the Present*, Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe, 2014, 233p.

(I only just picked up my copy two weeks ago at the annual Association for Asian Studies conference in Philadelphia. I have not used this in classes unlike the other books I have listed here. Nonetheless, I am familiar with many of the readings, some of which are a part of the Benda & Larkin World of Southeast Asia book of primary readings that is on your thumb drive. So, I feel confident in recommending this book even for class adoption. The book can be used in a world literature course or as an additional reading in a history course.)

Teri Shaffer Yamada, Editor, *Modern Short Fiction of Southeast Asia: A Literary History*, Ann Arbor, MI, Association for Asian Studies, 2009, 358 p.

(This book is probably not something that would be assigned to lower level college courses, but it may be added to any one of a number of upper division literature courses, especially those with a world theme or with a more specific Asia focus. Unlike the Dutton book, this is a literature history, survey and analysis which is a far more sophisticated book. I include this book here as a teacher course prep aid that can point you in the right direction to find something for a class.

### **The Philippines:**

F. Sionil Jose, *Dusk*, NY, The Modern Library, 1998, 352 p. Paper \$16.98, Kindle \$10.99

(Set in the last days of the Spanish colonial empire, the story is part of Jose's epic five part series of the Philippines. In this installment, a poor tenant family is forced from their home in the north and makes a hazardous and heart wrenching odyssey to the town of Rosales to the south. In the greater context, the country is being transformed by the fall of Spanish colonialism, the entrance of the United States and the Filipino nationalist war of resistance against the new imperial ruler. Though a bit long, students get into the story and feel for the characters in this tale that reads much like a soap opera.)

Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr., *Killing Time in a Warm Place*, Pasig City, Philippines, Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2006, 193 p. + epilogue. Free PDF in your thumb drive.

(This gripping novel is in part autobiographical as the author was a student activist during the years when Ferdinand Marcos reigned supreme and he, like the protagonist, was a

political prisoner. This is also a coming of age story set in the context of 1960s-70s anti-government activism. As well, it is a marvelous commentary about contemporary politics without being arcane in its references so students here can follow the story. And finally, the novel portrays a wide range of the population from slum dwellers to middle-class as the central characters are buffeted by false horizons, betrayal, compromise and guilt as well as the ever-present specter of government agents.)

## **Thailand:**

Botan (pseud. Supa Sirising), trans. by Susan F. Kepner, *Letters from Thailand*, Chaing Mai, Thailand, Silkworm Press, 1969 (2002 trans.), 412 p., paper \$18.95, kindle \$9.99 (Though long, students get into this story of a young Chinese immigrant to Thailand whose letters home to his mother form the basis of the story. The arc of the narrative tells Tan Suang U's life story from his youthful venture into the world, to his unhappy marriage, his children who are becoming more Thai than Chinese and his eventual finding peace with himself in an alien land. This tale would be especially appreciated by Asian-American students, but even our regular Georgia born and raised students get into this family life story.)

Siburapha, (pseud. Kulap Saipradit), trans. by David Smyth, *Behind the Painting, and Other Stories*, Chaing Mai, Thailand, Silkworm Press, 1954 (1995 trans. & 2000 printing), 160 p., paper \$16.16 (The author wrote romantic novel, and at first glance that is what this story is, but under this cover his story is a tale of social injustice and inequality. Jailed for his political activities for five years, Saipradit later sought asylum in China where he stayed until his death. The political nature of the novel is best brought out when students are required to compare the short novel of the book's title with one or more of the additional short stories which are much more obvious.)

## **Vietnam:**

Nguyen Du, *The Tale of Kieu: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. by Huynh Sanh Thong, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983, 211 p., paper \$21.09 (new, but there are many used copies on Amazon.

(Be sure to get the Yale version of this marvelous epic poem. The translation is, literally, an award winner and this edition contains extremely helpful introductions by both the translator and Alexander Woodside of the University of Michigan. Other translations do not have these advantages. Since this is a bilingual edition the right hand pages are the English translation of the Vietnamese on the left hand pages. So, the actual poem is really quite short, a bit over 80 pages. If any piece of literature defines a culture, this one does so for Vietnam. Every Vietnamese in the Atlanta area has at least heard of the poem and many can probably recite passages from memory – this includes even young born-in-the-USA kids. It always surprises me how much ALL of my students really get caught up in the character of Kieu as she defies fate and returns to her love and her family despite odds that would overwhelm anyone else.)

Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*, NY, Penguin Classics, 2004. 180 p. \$9.04

(This book will always be in print and at affordable student prices. Greene lived in Saigon in the period he writes about and some of his characters are based on real people, more than that, his subtle and not-so-subtle critiques of the American agenda for Vietnam which were already readily apparent to him became all came too true. This is a marvelous story on many levels.

If you want an alternative for your students, you might consider the 2002 movie version with Michael Caine and Brendan Fraser which is pretty good. Do Not use the 1958 movie version with Audie Murphy – a distinct second rate telling of the tale.)

Truong Nhu Tang, *A Vietcong Memoir*, NY Vintage Books, 1985, 350 p., \$10.77 (with many other copies available as new or used on Amazon)

(Truong was a young student in Paris when recruited by Ho Chi Minh himself when Ho was in France for an illusory peace conference at Fontainebleau. Truong rose as high as the Minister of Justice for the National Liberation Front in the south. Yet after reunification in 1975, Truong fled the government he helped create and became a boat person refugee. The arc of this story is unique and encapsulates the Vietnamese experience of the tragic American war better than any other.)

## **Indonesia:**

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, trans. by Willem Samuels, *The Fugitive*, NY, Penguin Books, 1990, originally published in 1950, 171 p. \$6.96

(Pramoedya has the distinction of being one of the very few Indonesians who was a political prisoner of BOTH the colonial Dutch AND his own independent government. He was a fearless critic of any who oppressed the Indonesian people or who were corrupt. Most of his writings were done while imprisoned, sometimes written on toilet paper or committed to memory and written down years later when he was again free. His body of work is impressive by any standard.)

(*The Fugitive* is set in the final days of WW II and concludes with news of Japan's surrender. More than a war tale, the story is of a young platoon leader who led a failed revolt against the Japanese due to a betrayal by one of his co-conspirators. He has been in hiding disguised as a beggar and at the last day of the Japanese occupation returns home to his father and true love. The social and political criticism is aimed not at the Japanese, but at his fellow Indonesians and is a stern rebuke for those who fight for liberty at the cost of their souls. This is a truly masterful tale that is told with an economy of words that would make Hemingway sit up and take notice.)

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, trans. by Max Lane, *Child of All Nations*, NY, Penguin Books, 1996, 352 p. paper \$13.47, kindle \$10.99

(This book is the second of Pramoedya's famous Buru Quartet, four books he first spoke to his fellow political prisoners on the island of Buru held after the tragic events of

1965. Released years later, Pramoedya finally had the chance to write out the words he had spoken in performance. This installment of the quartet has its hero, Minke, a Dutch-educated Javanese, coming to grips with Dutch oppression and injustice. He is met at every turn by the corruption of those he trusted and by the tragedies that befall those he loves most. As a study of the impact of colonialism this novel has few peers.)

## **Malaysia:**

Anthony Burgess, *The Long Day Wanes: A Malayan Trilogy*, NY, WW Norton, 1993 (reissue) 512 p. paper \$12.46

(It may be surprising to learn that the celebrated author of *A Clockwork Orange* wrote about Malaysia, but Burgess joined the colonial service in 1954 and worked as a teacher in Malaya, learned the language and became something of an authority on the country. He was also there as British authority was on its last legs. This book is a trilogy so don't be put off by the length. Each of the three stories is manageable for our students if any one of the three is selected. My favorite is the middle story "The Enemy in the Blanket" about a poor British lawyer who married a wealthy Malaysian widow for her money, but had to convert to Islam and actually practice the religion. His experience of surviving the month of Ramadan is priceless.)

A further note about Malay literature – there is a rather extensive body of literature that the Malays have produced since becoming independent in 1960, but little of this has been translated. We are fortunate, however, because Burgess is such a good writer and did not suffer from the usual European (and American) sense of cultural superiority that infected far too many colonial writers. Instead, Burgess gives us some interesting insights into the local culture even as he pokes gentle and not-so-gentle fun at his fellow Brits.

## **Burma:**

George Orwell, *Burmese Days*, many publishers all at reasonable prices and many copies available as used on Amazon.

(For Burma, as for Malaysia, the available indigenous literature in translation is just not there. Again, and very fortunately, we have another talented British writer who was not the typical colonizer. Like Burgess, Orwell was also in the colonial service, but in Burma not Malaya and as a police officer not a teacher.

In *Burmese Days* Orwell does much more than poke fun at colonial types, he clearly considers the whole lot of them as being little more than dullards and racists. His passion is important because Orwell shows us the raw attitudes of the powerful toward the colonials. With Pramoedya we saw the colonized analyzing and confronting ugly colonial realities as best they could, with Orwell we see the smug superiority of the self-righteous and powerful colonial masters in all their ugliness. Students might find the clear displays of crass racism uncomfortable, but this is the best way to deal with the reality.)