

Review by Roberto Bonazzi

Texas Writer Finds Intrigue in Asia

Versatility is the key to the eleven intriguing stories by Jerry Craven in *Ceremonial Stones of Fire*.

Craven, a member of the Lamar University writing faculty, offers versatility of viewpoints—third person omniscient, third person inside the central character’s mind, and a few in first person—plus various plotlines, twists and several surprising endings.

His realistic fiction is convincing in its characters, settings, dialogue and carefully-chosen details.

“Caught by Memory” uses a masterful alternation of the present with flashbacks, bringing forth characters’ struggles as reflected in current images.

In the case of Trish, we wonder why she has moved from job to job during a decade of teaching (ending up in Malaysia), where she may resign again due to a fit of hysteria by one of the girls in class because of evil spirits. This sets off a series of fragmented remembrances and mysterious dreams of her own high school days.

Little by little, Trish recalls her past and phones home to fill in the blanks. Her reluctant mother will not answer questions.

Slowly, Trish remembers why the family moved 700 miles across Texas, what happened to her best friend and to the fellow who got Trish pregnant. This deft story looks over Trish’s shoulder and scours her dreams and consciousness in a believable wave of re-discovery.

“A Man He Had Never Known” utilizes a similar alternation of time frames, as Reed conflates his father’s dying with a stranger found dead on the outskirts of a town.

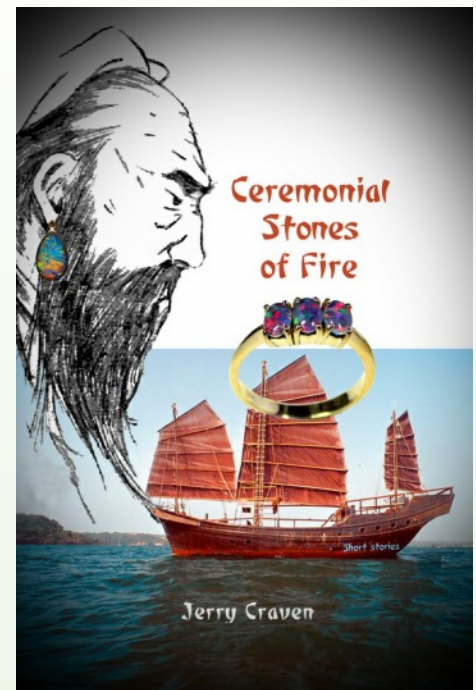
Like most of Craven’s main characters, Reed is from Texas (as is the author, who has visited Malaysia, Singapore, Bali, Nepal and the Straits of Malacca). Reed takes part in every phase of the Muslim ceremony that happens immediately (unlike American funerals), learning more than tourists learn, always an important factor in Craven’s stories and novels set in other cultures.

In “An Odor of Durian,” Cheong Lee Chin, pilot for the Peckenworths, picks up the ashes of boss Jude for his widow Miss Jackie. He takes the ashes to the train bound for a destination where the ashes will be spread in the Malaysian countryside. Lee is caught between Miss Jackie and Ravie (Jude’s secretary and, purportedly, one of his lovers). The women despise each other, and their dialogue is viciously revealing. Then we view the brilliant irony of the climax and its denouement, which explains the “meaning” of Durian odor.

Craven knows how to tell a story without a wasted word.

The first story (“New Opal Ring”) begins with the action of a robbery in an alley in Kuala Lumpur. Ed, an American businessman, is the victim, who loses a wallet and camera, but is saved further harm by a strange Chinese man. We learn of both through dialogue, and a later mystery then unfolds.

The author knows how to create subtle endings. This is also true for the climax of the title story that ends the collection (“Ceremonial Stones of Fire”). We may expect revenge on the pirate who killed an



old ship captain, but will be surprised at the form of that revenge.

In a search for the beauty of jungle butterflies, Sidney instead finds the beauty of Danila, a young Muslim woman in “The Eyes of the Cat”—a story that manages to avoid sentimentality in a shocking way. What might have been a cliché on the “clash of cultures” or maudlin love, takes a powerful turn toward stark reality.

These are suspenseful stories in the realistic mode. Craven, who is also press director for Lamar University Literary Press and Ink Brush Press, knows how to tell a tale without a wasted word, and while his novels of “exotic” places work well, the short story seem to be his outstanding métier.

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Robert Bonazzi’s book reviews and Poetic Diversity column appear regularly in the [San Antonio Express-News books pages](#)