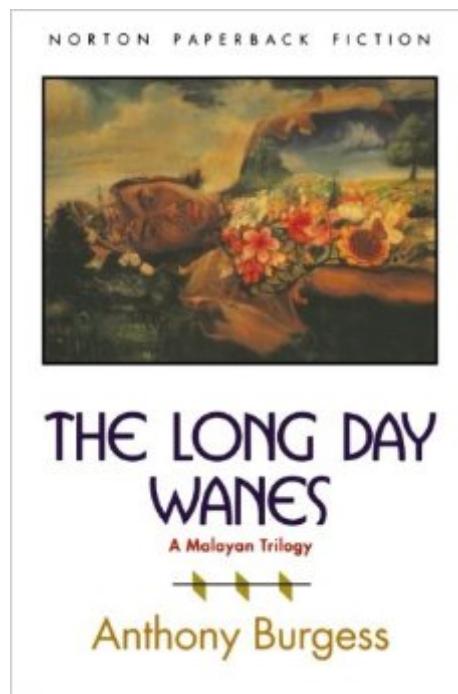


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The Long Day Wanes: A Malayan Trilogy (The Norton Library)



Synopsis

A sweetly satiric look at the twilight days of colonialism. Set in postwar Malaya at the time when people and governments alike are bemused and dazzled by the turmoil of independence, this three-part novel is rich in hilarious comedy and razor-sharp in observation. The protagonist of the work is Victor Crabbe, a teacher in a multiracial school in a squalid village, who moves upward in position as he and his wife maintain a steady decadent progress backward.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This ranks as one of the funniest books ever written, while being at the same time a social history of Malaysia, or Malaya as it was known under British Rule. The first book of the trilogy deals with the last days of British colonialism (hence the title "The Long Day Wanes") through the misadventures of a remittance man named Nabby Adams, a civil servant, his wife, household staff, and local government characters. The second novel follows the civil servant and his failing marriage through the guerilla years in the struggling nation, and the third is The Coming of the Americans. These three events have been a sort of template for late 20th century global affairs. It's a tight trilogy that reflects historical and social changes through its characters in the satirical literary slapstick characteristic of Burgess at his best. If you've never read Burgess, this is the place to start. It will bring you an appreciation of "where he's coming from," literally: it is based upon his experiences as a British Civil Servant in the waning days of the Empire (upon which the sun set 30 June 1997 with

the cession of Hong Kong to Red China). This review was originally published in June 1997 and with some site changes, my name got lost and was unable to transfer the review with my name attached, so this is a reprint of that earlier one.

One thing I have always admired about Anthony Burgess's novels is the compassion that he quietly conveys for his characters. They are all flawed: imperfect archetypes, reluctant saviours, apologetic swearers, gin mixed in with the orange crush. And we recognize ourselves in them all for this essential humanity, their endless struggle or acquiescence, for or against their unlikely fates. Burgess's humour is rueful and sharp: wistful disappointment and calm despair are the backdrop for his characters' heroic protests or desperate affairs. He also writes with a playfulness and intelligence that shines through every page. His sentences are as angular and memorable as his characters. His debts to Joyce and Shakespeare unite in his own unique style. *The Long Day Wanes* shows much of Burgess at his best, his setting and characters memorable vehicles for their fates and larger themes. The setting in Malaya is a world apart: inner struggles against human desires, social forces against cultural divides. While writing of a world that fast disappears, he tells us a story old as the Malayan jungle.

Burgess has achieved something remarkable in this trilogy in penetrating the mentality of the Chinese, Indian, Malays, Eurasians and British colonialists who inhabited the pre-independence Malaya of the 1950's. He cleverly dissects his vast repertoire of characters, from the lowest Tamil night watchman, Malay driver or Chinese towkay, to the highest Malay prince or most gin-soddened British official, in the most unpatronising way with bucket loads of humour and insight. Being British and having lived in Malaysia and Singapore for the past eleven years, I can deeply identify with the (alas, now imaginary) world of these three closely interlinked novels. It's a colourful cosmos which has sadly been erased forever by the forces of globalisation (that is to say, 'Americanisation'). In a sense, the erosion of the traditional ways and the coming of change and modernisation (not necessarily for the better) is one of the themes of the trilogy and a preface to the modern life of Southeast Asia, a place more of computers, stock markets and western style conspicuous consumption than a place of shady kedai, gin stengahs on cool verandahs or mysterious Wayang Kulit shows. As a postscript to the Malayan trilogy, you should also refer to the second volume of Burgess's autobiography in which he relates a visit, many years later, to this much-changed locale and is accosted in the northern Malaysian town of Ipoh by a young Chinese girl selling him not her body, but a western brand of evangelical Christianity.

Anthony Burgess was quite a character. Anyone familiar in the least with his life and work or who has read, say, the first volume of his Autobiography is aware of his splendid cussedness. He was also polymathic and erudite in the extreme. He's one of the few writers who read and reread and had (as well as any human being is capable) a grasp of Finnegans Wake - As his alter ego, Crabbe, muses to himself here, "Everything in Finnegans Wake made sense eventually, if one waited for it."---He was also, of course, a gifted composer and many other things. The motive for my mentioning this personal information is that this "Malayan Trilogy" is highly autobiographical, and it adds verisimilitude (ach, what a dashed clunky but apt word) and zest to the reading of it to know a bit about its author. But, of course, one really need not know a thing about Burgess to enjoy his work. In it, Burgess, in the form of Crabbe and other characters, doesn't fail to put his interests in language and musical composition etc. on display. But what really makes this book more than a pale copy of a Somerset Maugham work - Crabbe reflects, at one point, that he is the epitome of a character out of a Maugham short story - is the cantankerous humour and brio which enliven the book. It's not MERELY the gin-sodden Brit expats being swallowed into the jungle to which they came, ostensibly, to bring the "rule of law", but also a glowingly absurd and tragic account of the interactions between people and peoples, between husbands and wives, between rulers and ruled, all written in a way that, well, only Burgess could write. Yes, I agree with the other reviewers, the Americanisation of what is now called Malaysia is a sad thing. - No more eccentrics in their linen flannels quaffing gin on their verandahs before noontide. - But, truly, the saddest thing is that there aren't any writers of Burgess's stripe around now to chronicle such things so richly.

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