

The White Crocodile's Tale: My Memoirs by J.M.B. Hughes

Review by Mary Olwen Hughes

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At the end of a long life, John Michael Broome (Mike) Hughes wrote his memoirs for life-long Malaysian friends and his family and this context matters. First, because the memoirs are written with the playfulness of stories told after dinner to those held in closest affection. Second, in his eighties when he started writing, Mike self-edits his tale, highlighting what shaped him so although the reader knows the backdrop is one of dramatic shifts in the history of humanity, it is the effects of those events on a few lives that we read about. Of course his friends and family appreciate the tale, but this unedited voice from the past also prompts questions on several levels for a broader audience.

What is *The White Crocodile's Tale* all about? The life of a middle-class British school teacher, committed to the code of good behaviour of his time, devoted to his wife, his family and with a love of aesthetics, that's what. Another sentimental read about past times from a relatively privileged European cultural perspective? Well, yes it is, but that is part of the book's integrity because the author does recognise the syndrome and tries to balance it by being remarkably free from the kind of self-indulgent tone you could be forgiven for anticipating. The voice is authentic, clearly individual and never more so than when speaking of life's drivers for change, many painful, but none so transformational as love. Love for a person (he had a very happy marriage) but also for places with all their richness of scenery, peoples and cultures. In this case the love story starts in Asia but is, supremely, with Malaysia and the island of Penang. The pain of war, we read, squashes shibboleths and slaps you wide awake but only the healed have a reason to stay awake and nothing heals like love. Malaysia healed Mike and kept him awake for the rest of his life, sustained by contacts and mutually helpful exchanges that never ceased. The inference here is that personal transformation may be less about a conscious decision to change and more about being relaxed, open and receptive, ready to be surprised by what really is good; then working to sustain it.

The Hughes family, their travels and lives are at the core of the story. While the four generations written about seem a good-to-know (if occasionally eccentric) bunch, it is the Malaysians who stay with you once you put the book down. The cast of high-achieving, funny, bright and wholly honourable young people who enter the book in Chapter 5, soon take it over and are there right to the end - as old men and women themselves. Most of these were pupils, at the schools Mike taught at, The Penang Free School, The Malay College and Sultan Ismail College and they are described with palpable pride and admiration. Their delight in learning and their respect, apparently so refreshing after their more war-jaded British contemporaries, prompts reflections on the importance of where and when you originate - a sense of time and place - for potential to be set free. Forgive Mike a touch of pomposity, and you have a near text-book case study of how to notice potential with the leadership and humility to stand back, letting it fly. He took the approach with him wherever he went, even if sometimes disappointed by the way it was received. Perhaps this is about no two places ever being the same or perhaps it is about people not wanting to listen. Whatever, nowhere else was ever quite like Malaysia, and the extraordinary, brilliant people he met there, and whose friend he became.

Ultimately, however, the real question about education, leadership and realised potential raised in the Malaysian chapters of the *White Crocodile's Tale* and referred to throughout is about exactly

who it is doing most of the learning, when and why - and where else might this happen? This is far from an intellectual book, but it is a thoughtful one.

What makes a person remember is probably a biological process but the things remembered are unique to the individual man or woman and sometimes hindsight paints pictures differently from the way others remember them. This is human and a memoir is a conversation, in the first person, with another human about things remembered. It follows that to read *The White Crocodile's Tale* is to meet Mike Hughes, in all his humanity, in person and talk with him. The suspicion is that he would love the conversation to go on without him and that he thinks, still, it is a conversation worth having.

Oh and the crocodile? Best read the book to find out!