

horrendous. He had been set up, but he was a big catch for the self-righteous system, an opportunity to parade its 'no one is exempt' message.

Singapore, he says, is what happens when a lawyer with a narcissistic need for absolute control invents a country. Citizens' rights are a platitude rather than a reality.

Lloyd had not long before begun a relationship with a Singapore-based Malay airline steward, and was racked with guilt over subjecting their nascent bond to such stress. He worried that he had exposed his very proper partner as a member of a minority 'in an intolerant, deeply conservative Chinese community. The people who run this place have a long memory, and they are good haters.'

It was only after his release on hard-won bail that Lloyd began to have therapy and to realise how traumatised he had become. There is a high attrition rate among foreign correspondents who cover the tragedy trail: one in six suffers extreme post-traumatic stress disorder, and many have to leave their careers permanently.

Over months of waiting for trial, Lloyd worked to heal himself, while trying desperately to hold himself together as lawyers negotiated down the worst-case scenario to something almost bearable. Eventually, in the 'no escape' environment that is the Singaporean justice system, he pleaded guilty to charges that carry ten months' jail, which, with good behaviour and remissions, was reduced to 200 days.

Anywhere else in the world I would fight these charges, pleading for mercy and commonsense. But with no jury to plead to and a conveyor-belt one-size-fits-all legal system, winning is impossible ... Singapore's criminal judges work off a printed sentencing schedule, handed down by the higher courts ... it is impossible for a lower court judge to circumvent the system of predetermined sentences and exercise independent-minded judgement.

Jail, while no picnic, was not the inferno of his imaginings. Before long, he was made a 'cookie', the junior member of a trusted detail that dispensed food to

their cellmates. This brought privileges: \$1.50 pay a week, selected non-political television viewing and ten hours a day out of his tiny cell. He read incessantly, ran endless laps of the exercise yard when given access, wrote a diary, generally kept his nose as clean as possible, made superficial friendships and reassessed his values.

I am under constant human and video surveillance. I find that reassuring. Prisoners cannot get away with anything untoward but nor can officers; we are mutually accountable for our actions. Singapore prisons are probably cleaner and safer and more secure for prisoners than many penal institutions around the world.

When he was released from jail, Lloyd was determined not to look back – and he hasn't. In many ways, despite its intimacy, his memoir is of a similar mien. For all its facility and apparent confidences, it is no deep trawl into the mind of the man. It is honest, as far as it goes, and written with pace and some style, as befits a journalist of Lloyd's standing, but it is more imminent than eminent.

In the end, there is a Boy's Own gloss to the tale that leaves more than the odd question unanswered. In all writing, what is left out is more important than what survives the inner censor, and Lloyd is a little like the magician who focuses attention in desired misdirections to obscure the real legerdemain. His back-story is mostly noticeable by its absence, and the breathless emphasis on the debilitating of traumatic stress, while worthy of sympathy and understanding, begins to seem like a concealing rationale. The fears and doubts, and the long nights of the soul during his incarceration, vanish under a doughtiness that reads like the journal of a stiff-upper-lipped schoolboy at boarding school. Which is not, I hope, to demean a cautionary tale written with gusto and guts – it is just that it could have been so much better with less protective coating. ■

Murray Waldren's latest look is *The Mind and Times of Reg Mombassa* (2009).

A FEW RIGHT THINKING MEN by Sulari Gentill

Pantera Press

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It takes a talented writer to imbue history with colour and vivacity. It is all the more impressive when the author creates a compelling narrative. As an example of a burgeoning genre, *A Few Right Thinking Men* more than matches its historical crime contemporaries in both areas.

Rowland Sinclair is an artist and gentleman in 1930s Australia. Having lived a privileged and sheltered life, his world is thrown into chaos after the brutal murder of his uncle by unknown assailants. Concerned and greatly intrigued, Rowland infiltrates the echelons of both the old and new guard. Communism and fascism surface alongside other ideologies among the 'right thinking men'. As Rowland delves deeper, he edges closer to the truth of his uncle's murder.

First-time author Sulari Gentill creates vivid characters throughout. Rowland, his friends Clyde and Milton, and lover Edna all lovingly evoke a past artistic spirit. The brushes, paints and portraits hung around the house all leave an indelible impression of early Australian bohemia. Eric Campbell and Henry Alcott are also memorable, and a devilish sense of humour helps buoy the novel's more historic roots. Put simply, Gentill shows great understanding of both craft and structure.

A Few Right Thinking Men is the first in a planned series by Sulari Gentill featuring key protagonist Rowland Sinclair. This reviewer is heartened by the news, which demonstrates Pantera Press's willingness to support the continuing development of a talented emerging writer. It is rare to find such an assured debut as *A Few Right Thinking Men*. The novel deserves to be both read and remembered as an insight into the Australia that was; its conflicting ideologies, aims and desires; the hallmarks of a country still maturing.

Laurie Steed