

by **Grace Chin**

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While in his second year of working with an oil and gas company in Miri, Sarawak, Paul Leslie Smith met an elderly Iban man in Labuan at Shell's airstrip, where he was waiting for his plane. "We started talking and he told me about how the airstrip was bombed out during World War II. I started thinking about the history of the place," says Smith, explaining how his novel, *Rainforest Tears: A Borneo Story*, came about.

Smith furthered his research through documentation and by meeting locals who had lived through WW2 in Miri, and unearthed many fascinating stories about the history of Miri and how important its oil wells were to both the British and Japanese governments during the war.

Miri, which has been producing oil since 1910, found its oilfields under siege by the Japanese. Miri was the nearest oil reserve in the region for Japan, and it became a target as Japan needed fuel for its empire-building in Asia. In defence, the British government launched Operation Denial which involved the plugging of oil wells at Miri, Seria and in Brunei. Equipment at Miri's Lutong refinery was also dismantled and shipped to Singapore to keep it out of enemy hands.

"It must have been heartbreaking for the people who spent up to 20 years building these oilfields from nothing, to watch the oilfields being destroyed," says Smith, as he reflects on how the employees at Miri must have felt.

It's this period of uncertainty that Smith

weaves into a story about Geoffrey Portas, an oil engineer from London who works in the oilfields of Borneo. The 27-year-old takes to his new job and the tropical lifestyle with much ease, appreciating the refreshing change of views: exotica substituting the tedium of his British homeland, and the blue seas replacing grey English winters.

Portas meets Vong Tan, the daughter of a Chinese timber tycoon, but their dreamy romance is threatened when the Japanese invade the region. Amidst the urgency of the war and the challenges to his relationship with Vong Tan, Portas realises that Asian attitudes have changed — sensing the loosening shackles of colonial powers, the Asians no longer saw themselves as subservient. Portas is conscripted into Britain's Special Operations Executive, and sets out to fight a merciless enemy.

Rainforest Tears: A Borneo Story includes photos taken from the archives of Sarawak Shell Bhd from the early 1900s until today. It shows how Miri thrived as a little township and how the colonials lived. In the aftermath of the Japanese occupation and Allied bombings, the photos document a land razed to the ground. Many people there were tortured, enslaved and killed. Families were torn apart, livelihoods were lost, and the lives of Miri's residents were forever changed.

It's not an easy task to write historical fiction, as there is always a delicate balance in weaving fiction into fact. For research, Smith relied on stories narrated to him by elderly locals, some of whom shared heartbreaking



Smith worked in Malaysia for 17 years, the first four of which were at Miri, Sarawak's Shell station

and shocking stories of their sufferings. He says, "They would tell me things like, 'I saw my sister dragged out of the house by the Japanese and forced to become their comfort woman.'"

Smith's main source of historical research was *Masa Jepun: Sarawak Under the Japanese 1941-1945*, a book authored by Professor Bob Reece of Murdoch University. Reece is considered a leading historian on 20th century Sarawak, and Smith had found Reece's book extremely useful for its extensive oral and documentary accounts of what happened in Borneo during the Japanese occupation.

Through his descriptive style of writing, Smith displays commendable effort in also presenting the cultural and social history of the time, especially when he details the habits, personalities and lifestyles of the book's main characters. Smith certainly had very vivid goals in mind when crafting the story, presenting exactly what he wanted the reader to imagine unfurling throughout the 555-page novel.

Smith began piecing the story together when he was working in Australia. "It can be boring, so I started writing. It was also to keep myself out of the bar," he laughs. "I later took six months off work to finish the book. It's just something that I really wanted to do. And with historical fiction, you don't really need to look too hard to find something to write about."

Rainforest Tears: A Borneo Story is now available in major bookstores in Malaysia (RM85 a copy) and Singapore, with plans for distribution in Australia.