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## **Screams from many voices**

*Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images*

An anthology edited by M. Evelina Galang

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Paperback, 517 pages, \$22.00

By Andrew J. Weber

It's amazing what one bad review can do. When a 1998 *Milwaukee Magazine* write-up of a Filipino restaurant described the owner's child as a "rambunctious little monkey," an avalanche of opinions fell on the magazine. Depending on the response, the writer was ignorant, racist, insensitive, or maybe just misunderstood.

The original article and its spawn of criticism are the inspiration for *Screaming Monkeys*, an ambitious anthology assembled by M. Evelina Galang, a Filipina-American professor of creative writing at the University of Miami.

"Our goal was not only to document negative or positive representations of Asians in America, our goal was to seek any or all representations," explains Ms. Galang, and she delivers. Over 100 selections appear in the book, including fiction, essays, and poetry, as well as excerpts from public documents and images from the media at large. The list of contributors is just as broad, with relative unknowns alongside such names as Gish Jen, Li-Young Lee, and Maxine Hong Kingston.

Not surprisingly for an Asian-American anthology, many of the finest pieces in *Screaming Monkeys* focus on cultural blending, the forging of new identities, and the personal difficulties of assimilation.

In "My Country Versus Me," Wen Ho Lee recounts the 1998 FBI espionage investigation into his work at Los Alamos National Laboratory. Facing mounting evidence against him, Lee acts out his customary Christmas ritual in an attempt to maintain some normalcy in his life. He cuts down and decorates a pinyon pine, serves roasted duck, and lights a *luminaria* in front of his house, neatly marrying American, Chinese, and Mexican traditions.

Culture and ethnicity collide in David Wong Louie's *The Barbarians are Coming*, an amusing story about an ethnic Chinese chef from Brooklyn preparing French cuisine. In response to a client complaint about a meal (she was expecting something from China), the chef replies, "It's as Chinese as I am," deftly mocking the client's patronization but also hinting at his own identity issues.

Bino A. Realuyo's poem "Four Million" is equally effective, poignantly capturing in two simple lines the passing of old ways to make room for the new: "No chopsticks, we say. Our mouths long for the feel of forks and spoons."

However, several selections that reach beyond a personal perspective for more worldly conclusions are less successful. Vijay Prashad's essay "Summer of Bruce" recounts the author's childhood idolization of Bruce Lee, an identifiable sentiment for many. But the academic conclusion will likely keep most readers at arm's length: "Scholars are under some obligation to raise this [polycultural] instinct to philosophy, to use this instinct to criticize the diversity model of multiculturalism and replace it with the anti-racist one of polyculturalism." It might take Bruce Lee himself to kick some meaning out of that.

The meaning of a page of stereotyped Asian characters featuring Apu, the Indian convenience store clerk from TV's "The Simpsons," is weakened by lack of context. Apu is surely a stereotype, but can he be judged independently of the parade of stereotypes the animated show provides? Apu's regular customers include: Chief Wiggum, an incompetent, pig-faced cop; Monty Burns, a cadaverous, greedy industrialist; and of course Homer, a lazy, obese, blue-collar American, to name just a few.

On the other hand, Allan Isaac's analysis of the media portrayal of serial killer Andrew Cunanan suffers from too much context. Isaac concludes that the lack of media emphasis on Cunanan's Filipino background reflects the invisibility of the Filipino community at large. But following several sharp attacks on the traditional stereotype of Asians as "savages," this essay seems discordant. If the media had focused on Cunanan's ethnicity, they would no doubt be accused of perpetuating the "savage" stereotype.

Of course, any anthology of this scope is invariably a mixed bag, and what is one reader's junk may be another reader's treasure. The sheer volume of selections in *Screaming Monkeys* ensures that any page can offer a rewarding experience, and several stand-out pieces are not to be missed, including Maxine Hong Kingston's hilarious and biting "One-Man Show."

*Screaming Monkeys* presents so many views and so many voices, everyone is sure to find something to like. The selections can be funny or wistful, uplifting or offensive, bitter or sweet, angry or hushed, but they are always thought provoking and always engaging.