



Kalimantaa

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One hundred and sixty years ago a young Englishman founded a private raj on the coast of Borneo. The world he created eventually took in a territory the size of England, its expansion campaigns paid for in human heads. Here, polite Victorian conventions coexisted tenuously with one of the most violent cultures on earth, often with startling results: pockets of tenderness and extreme brutality appearing where least expected.

Into this world flowed a small tribe of adventurers, fugitives, criminals, and saints-- the madly talented and simply mad. And the women followed: wives and would-be wives, spinster nursemaids and heartless schemers, the rigidly virtuous and the virtually desperate. And always, the children, innocents too often the victims of an elemental nature both lush and deadly.

Kalimantaaan is the story of this world, these people. But the deeper story resides in the realm of the heart. It is about love in absurd conditions, the tenacity of it as well as our ability to miss it repeatedly and with perverse genius.

Kalimantaaan Details

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Author : C.S. Godshalk

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Brian says

"If he had reflected on his position at that (any) moment, on the absurdity of it, it might have created a vacuum in which the whole edifice would have collapsed on his head. He did not reflect." Kalimantaan is the tale of a boy making his life, and incidentally is also the story of leadership and followership in society. He set out with a vision of the king he would become, and in naiveté blundered along clueless, too ignorant to be fearful, but fortunate. And he pursued it with such speed that "maleficence lost its grip". And those he came upon saw him as they expected him to be, not as the vulnerable child he was, and so were cowed and followed him. And within the years of this grace period, between assumption and reality, he became who they expected him to be, and who he had set out to become.

Exotic locale, life in the wildest reaches of the Earth, biological warfare, love, lust, marriage ... story after story are told within this story.

My only complaint has been voiced already by others: the nearly constant failure to identify the subject of a pronoun causes the reader to, over and over again, flip around to figure out, or guess, at who is being discussed in a paragraph. I think the problem occurs from strict diligence to the letter artifice used to set up the narrative voice. She clung too strongly to it. Yes, I mean Godshalk.

Joel says

Kalimantaan is a very informative and fascinating tale about a period of history and a region of the world hardly known at all in the West. The story is apparently based on an actual English adventurer who, during the height of Britain's empirical feeding frenzy, stumbled onto an incredible opportunity to feed his megalomania as well as his obsession with memories of his dead mother. By a combination of blind ambition and pure dumb luck, he was able to establish (under the Crown) a raj, or kingdom, on the island of Borneo that in fact survived for decades despite incredible odds, constant disease, and tribes of warring headhunters.

But although the subject itself fascinated me, the writing was extremely difficult to follow. The author has a true gift for intentionally(?) obfuscating the narrative and confusing her readers, particularly by her nearly maddening use of pronouns with no clear antecedent. In a paragraph, for instance, with no less than seven "he"s or "him"s but no proper names, the persistent reader may eventually break the code to discover that the seven pronouns refer to at least four different men. I can only surmise that her editor must have been in on the joke. Or perhaps they agreed that such an approach would make readers spend more quality time savoring (a.k.a. re-reading) each page.

Still, given that the story itself was largely factual - including a cast of misfits and despots that would seem outlandish even in a work of fiction - for me, the plot outweighed the difficulties of reading it. If you're a fan of historical fiction, I recommend this book highly.

Kataklicik says

This book deserves another star. Really. The plot is good, the writing is good. So why have I given it 4 and not 5 stars?

Because it needs finesse-ing. Really. You need to get over the horribly confusing and disorienting 40-50 initial pages before you get to the good stuff (which literally then captures you and sweeps you away). Then you need to get over the myriad of Malay / Iban words that are NOT included in the glossary at the end of the book (you really DO need to understand these words to fully appreciate the nuances, and yes, I say this because I AM Malay). And lastly, you need to get over the many references of 'he' and 'she' which is confusing because there are a zillion and one characters and you're not sure to which character the author's referring to, which then leads to a whole lotta re-reading of paragraphs!)

One question though, Ms Godshalk - why dream up a fictional Gideon Barr when you could have written an epic novelisation of the Rajah Brooke himself?

Cindy Hansen says

I couldn't get past the first 115 pages. I didn't know what the hell was going on in the story. I read that it's tough to get into but eventually it's wonderful. I don't have the patience to wade through while waiting for that to happen. Maybe some day I'll try again.

Felice says

Kalimantan is based on the true story of Sir James Brooke. Brooke was an adventurer who two hundred years ago acquired/seized a kingdom, Sarawak, roughly the size of England on the northern coast of Borneo. Borneo is an island in the Pacific that is part of the Malay Archipelago. Brooke and his followers ruled Sarawak for approximately one hundred years. Brooke's exploits have already been fictionalized at least once before that I am aware of in Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim.

In Kalimantan, Brooke is Gideon Barr. As the self-styled "Raj of Sarawak", Barr imposes his brand of civilization on the natives whose land he's stolen and any immigrants, missionaries or businessmen who have found their way to his world. His wife, Amelia, views the colonial life and its contradictions quite differently than her British East India Company admiring husband. In Barr's private country Victorian civilities, self-importance and hypocrisy cover all manner of savagery by the whites and the love of tradition and celebration hide native barbarism. This is an environment that breeds cholera, smallpox and infection as easily as it does tyrants, madness and doom. Godshalk has inhabited Sarawak with varied and fascinating characters. There are not any levels of this society that are not examined and made important to the story.

This is not a novel about pioneers trying to conquer a hostile environment through hard work and sacrifice. Kalimantan is about colonialism and empire building on a grandiose scale. Damn the locals and full speed ahead. The rewards are great and little is allowed to get in the way of those prizes. Godshalk has triumphed in this magnificent undertaking. There is plot and color to spare. She has woven her many characters

complex stories and motives through a long gone world all the while dissecting it's mysteries and cruelties and celebrating it's beauty and culture.

Sadly Kalimantaan is currently out of print. If you are interested in novels about Victorian society, colonialism, imperialism, exotic cultures or really good writing then Kalimantaan is worth a search through a used bookstore.

Rob says

Beautiful. Gives a real insight into an almost unknown world.

Karl says

The first 20 pages are a tough slog while you figure out who some of the characters are, via letters. You might want to write down a few of the names and the relationships to orient yourself, until you pass through that section and get to the main story. After that, this is one of maybe the top 20 books I've read. Gorgeous, lush prose. If you're interested in SE Asia (esp. Malaysian Borneo), you have to read this. Novelization of actual history of the Bornean White Rajahs.

Mindy McAdams says

Beautiful and lush, complex, mysterious, frightening -- the book is much like Borneo itself. It's not an easy place to visit, let alone to know. If you have a little familiarity with the history, I think you will go deep into this book, like the jungle, and succumb to its charms and incantations.

When I was in Sarawak, I resisted all traces of the so-called white rajahs. I felt disgusted by colonization, greedy trade practices and the subjugation of native groups. In every bookshop in that state you can find English books about the Raj and the reign of the British over the northwestern lands of Borneo. I bought none of them.

I knew this historical novel focused on a thinly veiled depiction of the first rajah and his younger British wife. Something overcame my distaste, and I picked it up. Now it haunts me, like the sound of the jungle at night, the quiet barefoot steps of Iban men on invisible trails, the unseen trophy heads, the close heat of the longhouse.

It's a flawed book but well worth the effort it asks. Where the book succeeds tremendously is in conveying the strange mixture of alienation and belonging that the British characters experience. The author chose wisely, I think, in never taking the reader into the mind or heart of any native of Borneo, but rather allowed the reader to develop an outsider's knowledge of them.

Mark says

This is a breathtaking account of a remarkable place, a region that scarcely seems part of this world. The people in it are by parts naïve, cruel, ambitious, incompetent, callous, endearing, loveable, open-minded and archetypal.

The story is sufficiently convincing that I needed to remind myself that, although based on reality, the characters are fictitious. I half expect to go to the region and see the old house and Chinese shops.

Marlene says

Fascinating; a mood of brooding mystery and impending catastrophe is established from the very first pages.

This book fails to receive my highest rating only because of the author's style which often leaves the antecedents of her pronouns unclear. Also, the glossary of foreign words could have been considerably enlarged; I often found myself consulting it to no avail.

Christiane says

3.5 stars.

My automatic mental rating while reading this book oscillated wildly. Before the women disembarked in Borneo I was ready to give up on it (2 stars), with the introduction of the female element the story got a lot more complex, personal and interesting (4 stars) but towards the end it dragged on quite a bit (3 stars).

Apart from its length, my main problem with this book is the style. Had I known that the author was going to throw a cast of (seemingly) hundreds of characters and a vast number of place names at me I would have made a detailed list from the start. This problem is exacerbated by Ms Godshalk's annoying insistence on using personal pronouns instead of names and leaving it to the reader to sort things out (e.g. a paragraph starts as follows : "She said she would not, but at the last moment she did. He would look for her, wish to see her...". (Who is she, who is he and why would she not and then did ?)

The whole book seems to be written in a deliberately confusing, round-about, unclear, vague, weird and inscrutable way, another indication of which is the great number of Dyak and Malay words not listed in the hopelessly inadequate glossary.

There is no flow; the short chapters (some headed by enigmatic texts) are more like vignettes; paragraphs

end abruptly; crucial events are sprung upon the unsuspecting reader and due to the fractured style, the sense of time is lost : seasons come and go, people arrive and leave, babies are born and die and it all seems like a long, long time when actually it isn't and the female protagonist is still a young woman.

On the positive side, the writing is often very beautiful. There are some gorgeous passages, mainly those describing Borneo, its rivers, steaming low-lands, mountains and forests, the lush vegetation, the untold number of animal species, the unbearable heat and humidity below and the fresh crystal clear air above, the sea and the islands.

There are also some interesting – mainly Caucasian, mainly female – characters who come to life in the story while the Dyaks, the Malays and the Chinese are not given much personality and remain vague throughout.

Apart from greed, lust for power, ruthlessness, cruelty, superstition, loneliness, loss, hate and revenge a lot of space in the book is given over to love in all its expressions : filial and parental, marital and adulterous, soulful, romantic, platonic, passionate, selfish, unselfish, requited, unrequited, licit, illicit, pure, calculating, long-lasting or brief, and those for me were the best parts of the book and the reason why I might one day read it again (with a detailed list).

P.S. Some nitpicking : the word “siege” is misspelt 3 times as “seige” and “beseiged”.

Mary-Beth says

This novel depicts an English raj created on the coast of Borneo. It is written from several different points of view, although it mainly details the story of Gideon Barr the man who begins the ruthless carving out of the English settlement, and eventually the story of his English bride, Amelia. She becomes the center of the novel once she is introduced, which is a relief, because the novel founders a bit before her more human perspective is gained.

As I just mentioned the beginning of the novel is a bit slow, probably because all of the characters are various sorts of madmen and it was hard for me to relate to their manias. The surreality of the whole venture is well described and I enjoy the small supernatural elements that the author has added, the appearance of ghosts and malevolent influences seem suited to such an alien atmosphere as Amelia finds herself in.

Obviously a troubling novel in some ways due to the violent murders that occur throughout, especially since there is some absolution of Barr's actions simply because of Amelia's strange and intense love for him. I am left uncertain how I feel about this depiction, although violence is not glossed over or glorified except from the mouths of the characters themselves, which is to be expected.

The novel did an excellent job of immersing the reader in another world.

RK-isme says

I read this about 15 tests ago and recall being totally taken by it. It is fascinating. I recall feeling that I had been completely immersed in another world ... a world where various cultures come together and struggle for

supremacy, some overtly, some subtly. Individuality stumbles in the face of cultural unity. Personal values become signs of betrayal. In the final analysis, one individual risks all.

A book for anyone who wants to be immersed.

Robert Martin says

Ms. Godshalk is a most frustrating writer. Not only is her plotline opaque and desultory, her use of personal pronouns is confounding. One never knows who the referent is without a lot of work. All of this is worsened by the many exotic words/terms she uses without explanation.

This is sad especially because clearly she has a wonderful feel for the terrain, a feel I wanted to so much to enjoy but which eluded me in the thicket of peculiar vocabulary. I think there is a literary conceit here, a kind of intellectual arrogance, in which the reader is asked to accept the alien clime along with alien narration. Is Ms. Gotshalk sitting on a porch somewhere in Massachusetts enjoying her recondite success with prose no one can easily follow? I'm not sure I would even want to talk to her. I might never understand to what or whom she is referring. Definitely a book I would not recommend despite excellent research and excellent subject matter.

Bob

Mark says

This is one of my quickest rejects ever. About five pages. I kept thinking, if the writing doesn't get more direct and transparent soon, I'm outta here, and I am. Too bad, because the theme -- an actual kingdom set up by a white settler in Borneo -- was fascinating.
