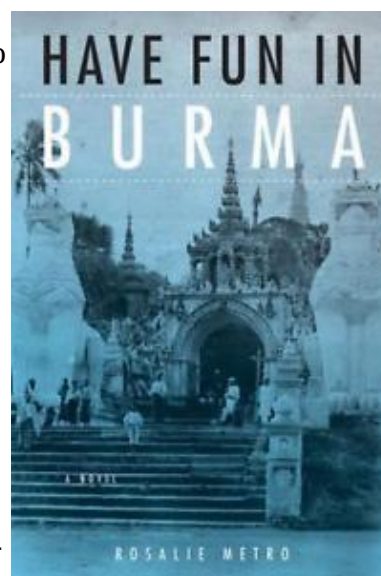


Book Review: Rosalie Metro 2018 *Have Fun in Burma*. A Novel. De Kalb, Northern Illinois University Press. 236 pp. US\$ 19,95. (A kindle version is available for US\$ 8,39)

The book's title cleverly conceals that the story told in the novel provides an introduction into Myanmar's absolutely not funny contemporary realities. The book is about the tense relationship between Buddhists and Muslims highlighted by the Rohingya crisis and these heavy themes are unfolded in it "an Assistant Teaching Professor in the College of Education at the University of Missouri-Columbia" and holds "a Ph.D. in Learning, Teaching, and Social Policy from Cornell University. Furthermore, she teaches "insight meditation at Show Me Dharma".¹ She did the field work for her Ph.D. thesis on the Thai-Burmese border investigating the options of using history curricula for the purpose of ethnic conflicts through a series of workshops with Burmese migrants and refugees of different ethnic groups.² In "Have Fun in Burma", the author displays her many talents as an educationist, historian, practitioner of Buddhist meditation and writer in a thrilling way.

The book's main character is Adela Frost, a young American, who decides to spend three months in Myanmar between finishing high school and entering college as a volunteer to broaden her horizon and get over the breakup of the relation with her boyfriend. The country is introduced to her by the soft chanting of a Burmese man working in her school's cafeteria. He has come to the States after participating in the upheaval of 1988 and introduces the student to some Burmese phrases and his version of the country's sad recent history. The country needs international help, she learns. Her ex-boyfriend provides another kind of information. He presents her an academic study about Myanmar's ethnic conflicts together with a personal note on the inside cover: "Adela, Burma is complicated. Have fun."



Adela arrives in Myanmar in mid 2012 shortly after the Buddhist-Muslim troubles in Rakhine broke out. She learns about the many meanings of the word *kala* after a rather shocking visit to a local hospital where some other volunteers are going to work. The word is uttered in a hissing tone by a patient when the volunteer offers some water to an old lady with a dark skin. After this introduction to the "Muslim problem", Adela starts her service to teach English at a Yangon monastery school. To her surprise, her first students are five monks. They need the language skills for teaching foreigners in course of the meditation courses the monastery offers.

Between these highly loaded poles of a peaceful Buddhist monastery supervised by an abbot who lives the detached loving kindness (*metta*) that he teaches and the anti-Muslim sentiments shared by one of the monks taught by the volunteer and many Myanmar Buddhists a drama develops that gets out of control.

The drama is set in the small world of the monastery that however proves to be a microcosm not just of Myanmar society but the global community.

Adela whose favorite subject is literature reads Orwell's "Burmese Days" and compares it to Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." She falls in love with a Burmese man some years older than she who has spent some years in prison for an incidental involvement in the Saffron Revolution. An elder

1 <https://www.rosaliemetro.com/>. Show Me Dharma (SMD) is a non-profit organization dedicated to making the study and practice of Insight Meditation available to Mid-Missouri. We support and encourage the development of community based upon Theravada Buddhist ideals, teachings and practice. (<https://showmedharma.org/>)

2 For a summary of her research see https://www.academia.edu/4348663/History_Curriculum_Revision_as_an_Intergroup_Encounter_Promoting_Inter-Ethnic_Reconciliation_Among_Burmese_Migrants_and_Refugees_in_Thai.

sila-shin takes care of her in a motherly way and demonstrates that abiding by the virtues taught by the Buddha and regularly practising meditation can help to deal even with worst personal misfortune. Because of her she tries to do a meditation course taught by the abbot that proves to be very strenuous and generates rather mixed results. She records her experiences in a blog that gets various kinds of feedbacks from friends, parents and teachers back home. Finally, there are the many faces of Facebook.

This medium is used as a tool to do what she thinks could be helpful for Myanmar: fighting the hate between Buddhists and Muslims and promoting harmony between the communities. What was first conceived as “just an idea” terribly backfires when it is put into practise. A number of people she met in the monastery have to leave the safe place provided by the monastery. She returns to America with a bad conscience.

In the end, the book tells how Adela tries to deal with the personal crisis resulting from her actions in Burma. However, the book does not suggest any judgement of Myanmar’s contemporary crisis to the reader. The book just tells a story. The sentences at the end of the book point to the author’s intention when she writes about Adela’s final assessment of Orwell’s novel: “Orwell wasn’t trying to describe the way things to be. He wasn’t even describing the way things were. He was just describing what he saw.”

Rosalie Metro describes what she sees in today’s Myanmar. It is a piece of fiction that conveys the complexity of Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim problem better than most texts about the issue that try to “explain” what is going on the Rakhine-Bangladesh border and in the rest of Myanmar because it shows that the western perception is part of the drama that has unfolded there. The book may help to change the way to look at Burma like it changed the perception of its main character. After her return to the States, she gives some advice to a student at her former high school who intends to interview some Burmese exiles about their assessment of the 969 movement in their home country. She concludes her advice with the words “Burma is complicated – but left off “Have fun.”