

## Problems of 'Passing' Ron Klein

The word 'passing' has many connotations and collocations. In American race relations, 'passing' means being taken for someone else, usually a black person appearing to be a white. 'Passing over' means to skip or ignore. 'Passing by' means moving on without stopping. 'Passing up' means to reject, 'passing out' means to lose consciousness, 'passing around' means to not keep but 'pass along' to someone else. 'Passing through' connotes an entrance into a new place or state of being, though usually not to stay and, of course, 'passing away' means to die. In literary terms, a 'passage' is a textual part of the whole. It has been also been used as a literal, imagined, perceived, observed or metaphorical journey, as in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* or Kenneth Roberts' *Northwest Passage*.

In the academic genres formerly known as Commonwealth Literature or Post-colonial Literature (sometimes referred to as Postcolonial Literature) there was a lot of 'passing' going on. Works from the periphery were 'passed by,' 'passed over,' 'passed up' or 'passed around' on their academic way to the Canon. And not enough fanfare was made when an author or work 'passed into' or 'passed through' to the sacred land of universal acclaim, positive reviews, extended shelf life and university syllabi.

The academy has been kind to some of these works, adopting some of this 'passed over' fiction into its nouveau genres – Asian American Literature, Anglo-Indian Literature, South Asian Diasporic Literature, Middle Eastern Fiction, World Feminist Literature, Postcolonial Environmental Literature and other recent additions to academic careers and commercial niche markets.

So through the years, sub-genres of the genre formerly known as Commonwealth Literature have crept up, based on pioneer works followed by market demand for similar works. Thus June Chang's *Wild Swans* has spawned a cottage industry of books written by Chinese émigrés about their ancestors' suffering and their own escape from twentieth-century Chinese madness. Maxine Kingston/Amy Tan clones wrote about their mothers' secrets. The netful of Vietnamese American boatpeople wrote fiction centering on life before and after 1975. Indian American and Anglo-Indian fiction have done very well, indeed, spawning not only matured works in the shadow of Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee, but also devolving into a sub-sub-genre of Indo-American Chick Lit.

But we must not kid ourselves. The Establishment Gatekeepers are very strict. For example, the *New York Times*' 50 Notable Books of 2010 fiction lists a few translations, a few Anglo/American hyphens, but besides a William Trevor collection of old stories and Derek Walcott's latest poetry, not one resident African, Caribbean or Asian writer of English. The *Times Literary Supplement* did worse. That's a lot of 'passing over' still going on!

But then again, there is the ultimate in 'passing' – the 'passing out' of knighthoods to Sir Vidia and Sir Salman. But that's another story that we'll 'pass' on for now ...