

Lynne Minion. *Hello Missus: A Girl's Own Guide to Foreign Affairs*. Harper Collins.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley in *The Adelaide Review*, June 10, 2005, p. 22.

There is much in *Hello Missus*, Lynne Minion's memoir of her year in East Timor, that didn't make it to Australian television screens, where the success and benevolence of the international assistance provided by the United Nations was never in any doubt.

One surprise is that the foreigners – or *malae* – trying to rebuild the country aren't universally loved. In fact, Minion, blonde and striking, had to dodge murderous taxi-drivers more than once. And on reflection this is not hard to understand. Many of the UN workers are 'monstrously overpaid', while the East Timorese are lucky to earn \$1 a day. No wonder they feel some resentment and are less than co-operative with their benefactors. Then there is the little question of a huge gender imbalance: most of the foreign workers are men and the UN 'had probably introduced HIV to East Timor and was certainly spreading it'. So much for foreign aid!

Another surprise is that East Timor, for all its desperate poverty, was able to provide quite a luxurious style of living for many of their foreign visitors. Booze was cheap, and restaurants and night clubs provided nightly entertainment for those who could afford it – which left out most of the East Timorese, of course. And for all their resentment of the *malae*, when numbers dwindled after independence, opportunities for cashing in also began to disappear.

All this makes East Timor a less than welcoming and heart-warming place for a young Australian who wanted to help 'capacity-build' the locals in the skills needed by

an independent nation. However, Minion is not deterred. Having seen that 'East Timor ... can be innocent and it can be cruel, charming and horrible, beautiful and ugly,' and that 'the world sees one dimension: that it is an inspiration,' she goes on to wonder whether it is 'possible for the rich in their world to really help the wretched.' And, happily, she decides that despite the UN's failures, 'humanitarianism is the only enemy of evil.' After the frustrations of her year there, it is just as well for her peace of mind that she can come to this conclusion.

Hello Missus will offend some. It is controversial not only in the facts Minion exposes, but in its tone. Minion is irreverent, flippant, and disrespectful to iconic figures like Jose Ramos Horta, but she is also passionate. Her narrative is as chaotic as the society she is portraying. It tumbles onwards in a precipitate present tense, never looking ahead to foreshadow events to come. She introduces stereotypes and caricatures of East Timorese, but also her UN colleagues and the Australian police. And herself. She loves pretty strappy dresses and impractical shoes, and falls in love unwisely but too well. But after the solemnity of most books about these kinds of situations, Minion's book is utterly refreshing and despite its length a delight to read.