*The Gift of Rain* by Tan Twan Eng

I was fortunate enough to discover this book on a communal bookshelf in a guesthouse in Georgetown, Penang, as I was travelling through Malaysia in 2016. As the novel is also set in Penang, I had the weird and wonderful experience of being able to physically see, hear and taste for myself some of the beautiful imagery from the book, as well visiting some of the important landmarks that shape the protagonist’s incredible story. Penang remains my favourite place in South-East Asia, for its beautiful mix of old Chinese teahouses, temples, mosques, British colonial buildings, lonely beaches, jungle hill forts, aggressive monkeys and most importantly, the mind-blowingly delicious street food.

Set in Penang, 1939, this novel reflectively tells the story of 16 year old Phillip Hutton, who was born into a wealthy English family in Malaya (modern day Malaysia). His mother was Chinese and his father English. Feeling like he truly belongs to neither nationality, he discovers a sense of belonging in an unexpected friendship with Hayato Endo, a Japanese diplomat who trains him in the art and discipline of aikido.

When the Japanese eventually invade Malaya during the second world war, there comes a time when Philip is once again split in two; between his loyalty to his family in order to protect them, and to his greatest friend and mentor, Endo-san. Endo-san gets him a job, working for the Japanese in order to keep his family out of the labour camps, however he is not spared the tragedy of war as his brother, who joined the Navy, is killed in battle, and his sister is killed while working for the resistance against the Japanese. Philip’s internal struggle intensifies, and Endo-san, bound by discipline and loyalty to his country, has a devastating secret.

The decisions Phillip makes as a teen weigh heavy on him for the rest of his life.

*"Like the rain, I had brought tragedy into many people's lives but, more often than not, rain also brings relief, clarity, and renewal. It washes away our pain and prepares us for another day, and even another life. Now that I am old I find that the rains follow me and give me comfort, like the spirits of all the people I have ever known and loved."*