

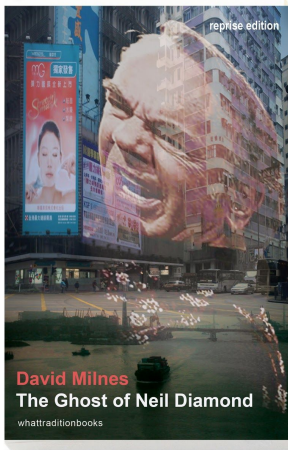
Hong Kong review:

## Big Lychee, Various Sectors

*Watching the sun set, little by little, on Asia's greatest city – with a dash of Hemlock*

### Book review: **The Ghost of Neil Diamond**

A quick break from National Regina Week for a review of *The Ghost of Neil Diamond* by David Milnes. The hard-to-forget title proved its worth when I saw this in the IFC Mall branch of Dymocks last week and recalled an email strongly urging me to read it. It is, in brief, what a Hong Kong expat novel would be like if Tom Sharpe wrote it: a farce in which an innocent abroad gets himself into an appalling and ludicrous mess.



Other than the eye-catching title, the book cover does the novel no favours by omitting any meaningful blurb about the content. It helps to know that Neil Diamond is one of the uncoolest of the great Sixties-era songwriters, penning a string of major catchy hits for various artists and becoming ever-less trendy with age while still performing to his loyal and mature easy-listening audience.



Aside from serving as a refreshingly seedy setting for a bizarre romp, Hong Kong's contribution to the story is the theme of self-reinvention. Antihero Neil Atherton is a British former folk musician pushing 50 who has come here when his wife gets a high-flying job. While he bums around singing classics like *Sweet Caroline* in karaoke bars, she eagerly embraces a new identity and corporate lifestyle. When he dyes his hair after grubby empresario Elbert Chan offers him a job impersonating Diamond in clubs, she kicks him out. Like his namesake standing by the side of the road troubadour-style on an album cover, Neil trudges off with his guitar from the comforts of Shatin to find cheap lodgings in Tsimshatsui.

Chan – a finely drawn shyster we've all met before – entices the penniless Neil with his vision of an award-winning show comprising multiple acts covering yesteryear's major stars; a faux Petula Clark has already been lined up. But Chan is clearly an untrustworthy huckster. After a first, promising gig at the Mariners Club, disaster strikes when a genuine, highly accomplished, professional Neil Diamond impersonator of repute from Los Angeles turns up in town and tells Neil to beat it. Outrageous chaos ensues.

*The Ghost of Neil Diamond* – decently crafted, unpretentious fun with a dash of black humour, and worth grabbing if you see it. It warrants extra marks for its cliché-free depiction of an unglamorous and squalid Hong Kong, exemplified by the pitiful Chan and his grubby office. The HK Tourism Board won't be handing out copies of this book. Is there any higher praise?