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Featuring
guest writers:

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Kim Cheng

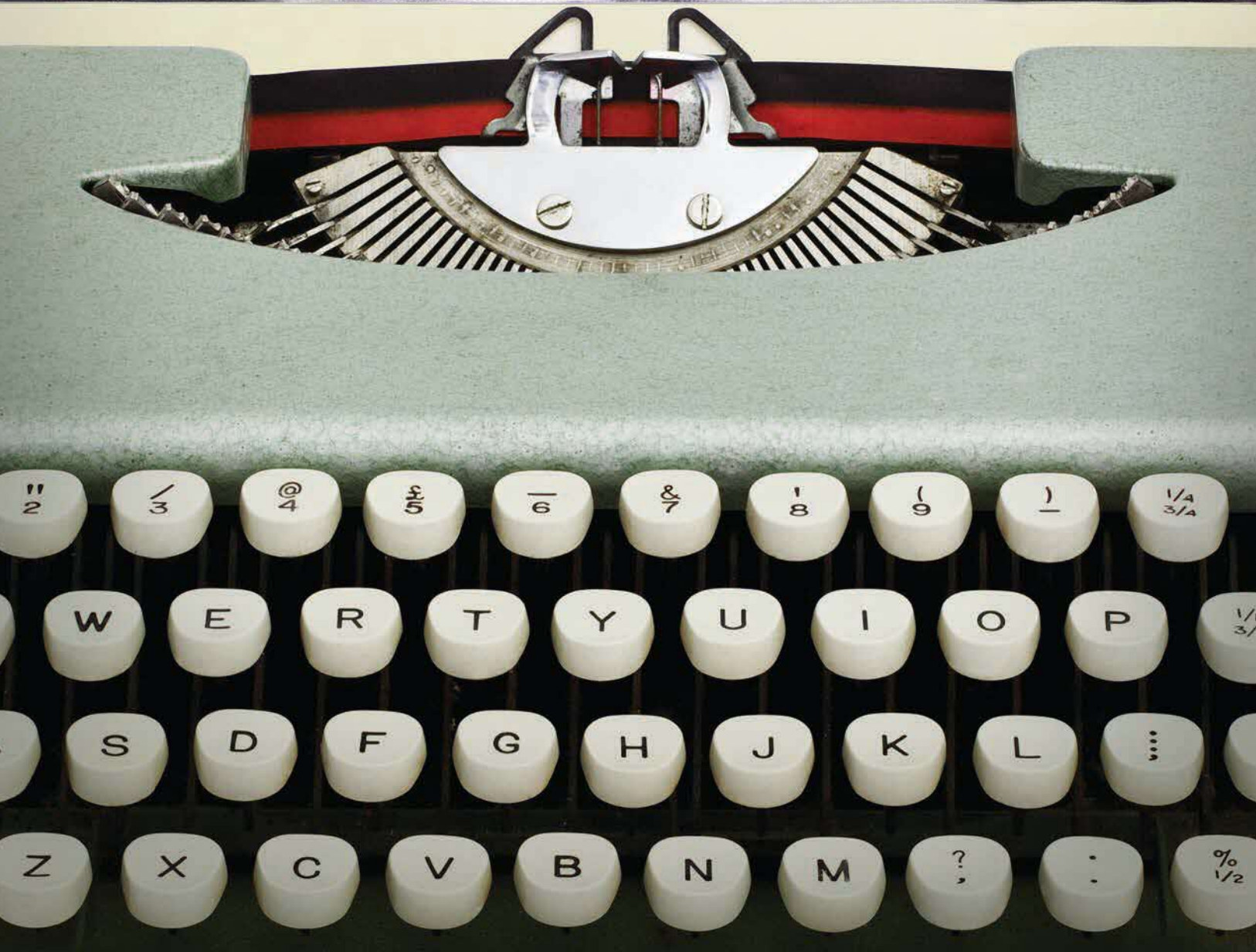
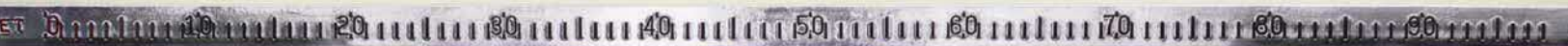
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Director's Column

While on a dreadfully long flight from Singapore to Washington D.C. recently, I decided I would finish a book instead of surfing through the channels on the in-flight entertainment system. On a whim, I had brought along a copy of *Between Stations*, an autobiographical journey of cities in India, China and Singapore by the poet Boey Kim Cheng.

Twenty hours (and 320 pages later), I felt completely reinvigorated by Boey's beautifully crafted travel memoir. I felt I had somehow experienced what the erudite Italian writer Italo Calvino called *Invisible Cities* – cities of the mind conjured purely through powerfully evocative words that vividly create fantastical imaginings of a city.

In this issue of *BiblioAsia* on literature, reading and memory, Boey repeats this magical act of rebuilding a city of the past through his teenage recollections of the red-bricked National Library at Stamford Road and the musty old Bras Basah Road bookshops. Claire Tham recounts her childhood reading staples of Enid Blyton, Charles Dickens and P.G. Wodehouse and how magically they left on her subconscious such an indelible impression of post-war England that when she eventually visited London, it was “as familiar as a recurring dream.” In Meira Chand's recollection of her experience researching her latest novel *A Different Sky*, she details her struggles reconstructing the world of post-independence Singapore – a world she had not experienced herself. She discovered her voice – her 2am moment as she calls it – only when she was able to people that empty, vacant world with the memories of others, ultimately, becoming a willing repository of the lives others had lived.

We are delighted that the much-lauded English novelist Neil Gaiman gave the National Library permission to reproduce his powerful speech on libraries, reading and daydreaming. In his stirring entreaty championing for the continued existence of libraries, I was intrigued by his idea that books are a way of talking to the dead, giving us access to cultures and tales older than most of the places we know, older than some of the ancient civilisations of the world.

Closer to home, Dr Azhar Ibrahim turns the spotlight on the literary pioneer Suratman Markasan and shows us how his works not only serve to critique and question current issues but also act as the social memory of the community in “Suratman Markasan: Malay Literature and Social Memory”.

In “First Words: Women Poets from Singapore”, senior librarian Gracie Lee traces the female poets who made an impact on Singapore's literary scene from the 1950s to 70s and paved the way for newer generations of writers to come. The 1980s was a boon for Chinese children's literature and in “1980年代儿童小说中的新加坡儿童” Jessie Yak looks at how Singapore children were portrayed in these works. In “சிங்கப்பூர் பெண் எழுத்தாளர்கள் - ஒரு பார்வை” Sundari Balasubramaniam highlights Singapore female Tamil writers who made and are still making waves in the local Tamil literary scene. Finally, Lynn Chua highlights the gems of the Asian Children's Literature collection in “Folk Tales from Asia”, unique handmade books that hail from countries as diverse as Japan, India and China.

I hope this issue will move you to pick up a work of literature and lose yourself in a world that only exists or exists once more in words and the imagination. Or as Gaiman quotes from Einstein, maybe we should all read a fairy tale.

Gene Tan
Director, National Library

BiblioAsia, the flagship publication of the National Library, features articles on the history, culture and heritage of Singapore within the larger Asian context, and also presents highlights of the National Library's collections.

Editorial & Production

Editor
Stephanie Pee

Managing Editor
Francis Dorai

Editorial Support
Masamah Ahmad, Sharon Koh

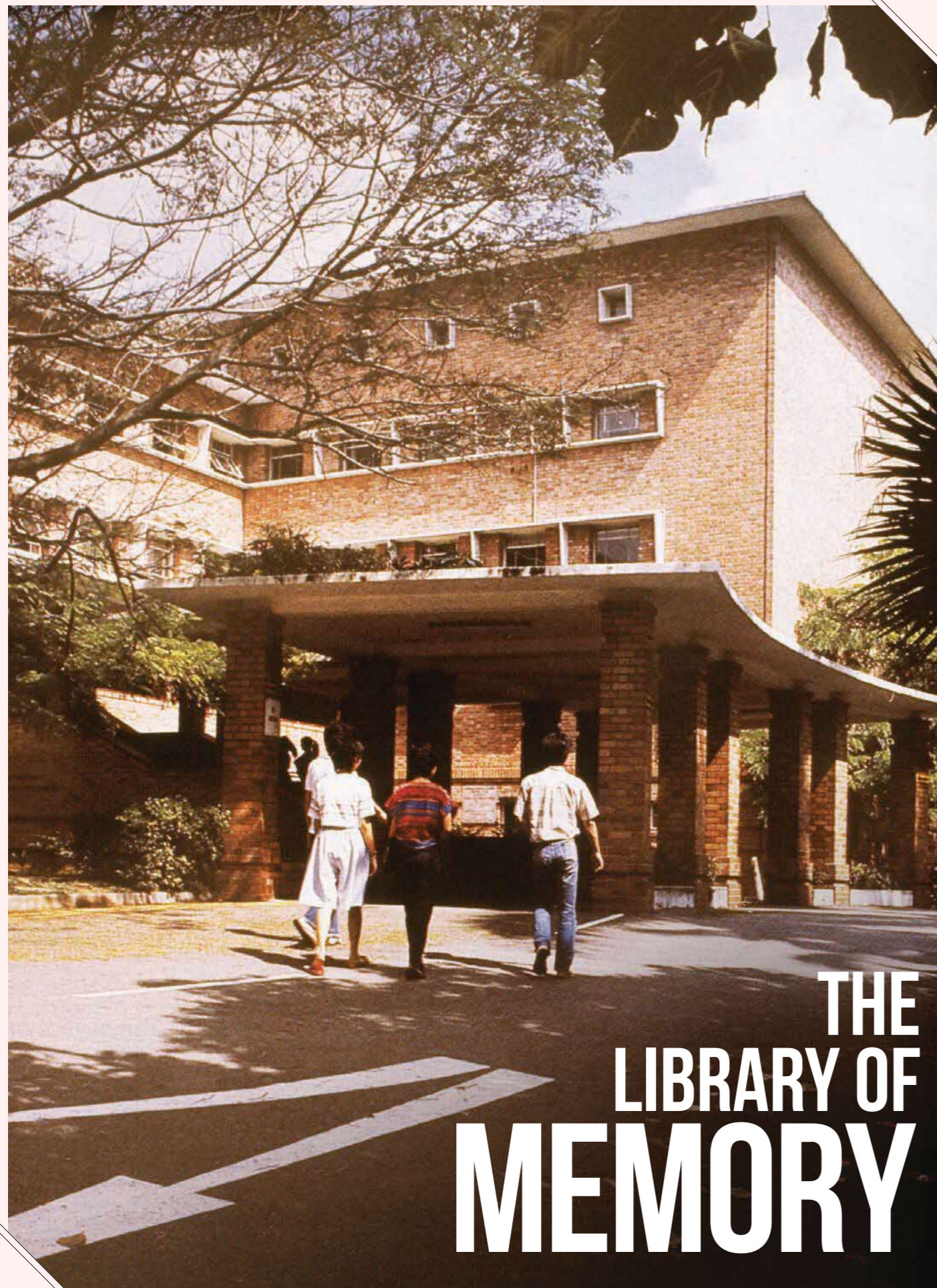
Design and Print
Oxygen Studio Designs Pte Ltd

Contributors
Sundari Balasubramaniam,
Boey Kim Cheng,
Meira Chand, Lynn Chua,
Neil Gaiman, Ho Yi Kai,
Hameedah M Ibrahim,
Azhar Ibrahim, Gracie Lee,
Paula Sim, Claire Tham,
Jessie Yak

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THE LIBRARY OF MEMORY

Boey Kim Cheng's memories of Singapore are closely tied to his recollections of reading and the old red-bricked National Library. Here, he remembers his love affair with the library, with words and with books.

From the street it looks nondescript, facing the Parisian-looking Park Mansion and around the corner from the Palladian Geological Institute, which looks a more fitting home to an establishment founded in 1788 to advance knowledge and research in all things Asian. It occupies No. 1 Park Street, now renamed Mother Teresa Sarani, a Modernist block with a clean rectilinear shape defined by protruding trim painted the ubiquitous vermilion red of Kolkata, its central block shielding the stairwell perforated by square holes. Kolkata's four-storey building of the Asiatic Society, opened in 1965, the year Singapore and I were born, is pleasantly familiar; the old Rediffusion building in Singapore and numerous institutions built in that era, all vanished now, had the same provenance in British modernism.

I walk up the dusty steps and sniff the cool, dusky air, savouring the invigorating odour, a genteel, gentle whiff of slight must, stone, wood and paper. I have always loved the smells of old buildings and this is why I love this city, incredibly rich in buildings that have been allowed to age gracefully over time, their history palpable as much in their appearance as in the smells they wear. The security guard barely looks at me, his gaze focused on the busy street outside, where the pavement book-, *bhelpuri*- and shoe-repair- wallahs ply their trades. There is a defunct baggage scanner and a small cannon mounted on the stairwell.

Upstairs at the bag counter the male attendant lays his newspaper aside and instructs me to deposit my camera and to fill out a pink slip of paper that says "Admit Card for Casual Readers" and then to see Miss Mishra inside the library.

A musty silence hangs in the fluorescent-lit reading room, stirred by ceiling fans that give it a slightly drowsy feel. Running along the middle is a double row of wooden cabinets housing small drawers. "Here you find authors, subjects, all arranged," Miss Mishra the librarian explains, who has interrupted her *vadai* tiffin to give me a tour. On the right are about 10 rows of tables; two pretty brunette German girls are poring over buckram-bound tomes, taking copious notes. Yesterday I overheard them in the Blue Sky Café talking excitedly about Csoma de Kőrös, the intrepid Hungarian Orientalist who had travelled to the remotest parts of Ladakh and Zanskar to study Tibetan language and culture. He was an honorary member of the Royal Asiatic Society and from 1837 to 1841 worked as its librarian.

We cross a sky bridge to the original building of the society, a Tuscan-yellow

two-storey flat-roofed building with French shutter windows, hidden from the street by the modern block. It has a gallery with oak balustrade and a rather grand central staircase. On the high shadowy walls time-dimmed paintings of Indian landscapes hang, their features obscured by the angle and grime; they remind me of European depictions of the Australian bush, panoramic views that could be anywhere in Europe except for a few natives planted in the background.

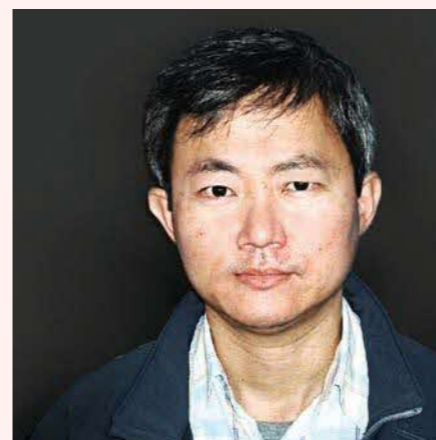
Spaced along the gallery are busts of the society's luminaries: its founder William Jones, Csoma de Kőrös, and Ashutosh Mukherjee, the formidable education pioneer who was thrice elected to be president of the Society. Miss Mishra steers me to the Sino-Tibetan and South-Asian Languages, the Sanskrit and other Indian Languages, and the Persian and Urdu rooms. Most of the books are covered in a thick film of dust. I take out an 18th-century book of Persian poetry and it nearly comes apart, some of the mouldering pages loosened from binding.

"So much here. Very precious," I say politely, replacing the antique volume guiltily.

"Everything important comes to us. All kinds of books from the museum, the Geological Institute, the National Library. We are the Mother library," Miss Mishra says proudly. I ask about the manuscripts room, but Miss Mishra says it is closed for "cleaning." I wanted to see the famous Tipu Sultan collection.

We return to the reading room. There is no sign of a computer so far. I ask if the catalogue has been digitised but Miss Mishra's head tilts in a yes-no sort of way. I leave her to her tiffin and make for the catalogue and its columns of drawers, each carrying a tag and a brass draw pull. I open them at random, too thrilled to remember what I am looking for, flipping the cards and relishing the sight of the typewritten entries, and the feel of my fingers walking the paper ridges. I am playing with the drawers, taking delight in the compact ease with which they slide open and close, marvelling at the rows of alphabetical listings that are the addresses of writers and books, in an age when the internet has banished them to the memory of older library users. The well-thumbed cards, redolent with human touch, many stained and creased at the top, their typescript sometimes broken, the ink uneven, some bearing corrections and white-out¹, possess for me talismanic power to evoke the essence of a book. It has been a long time since I have felt excited about being in a library.

These ranks of index cards have nudged open a door into my reading past.



Singapore-born **Boey Kim Cheng** has written five collections of poetry and a travel memoir *Between Stations*. Boey lives in Australia, where he is now a citizen and teaches creative writing at the University of Newcastle. He is currently a writer-in-residence at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

I can see my younger self touring the collection at the National Library in Singapore, relishing the idea of the entire library at my fingertips as I scan the accordion rows of cards. These 3-by-5 cards were first conceived by naturalist Carl Linnaeus to allow taxonomic classification and storage of scientific data, and adapted by Melville Dewey, the pioneer librarian whose classification system still steers reading journeys in the internet age. They were a library in their own right, each card a promise of what was to come, a map revealing routes to the different provinces and districts of the vast kingdom that is the library. Like the ocean it linked multitudes of destinations and made them contiguous.

My rite of initiation into library use began with an introduction to the catalogue, metal cabinets that were lined up back to back longitudinally in the middle, bisecting the floor space of the Adult Lending Section of the old National Library on Stamford Road. I had just signed up as a member at the loan counter, a square space with the return counter on the left side as you entered and the loan counter on the other, a team of librarians operating behind them. At the registration and information desk between the loan and return counters, I had been given four pocket-sized lending cards, beige, like the uniform of the library attendants, with a sleeve to hold the corresponding card books carried on the inside of their back cover as a sort of ID (on the flyleaf was glued the date due slip – there were books that boasted layers of library slips with innumerable loan dates, others bore only a few date stamps). The librarian told me to wait until there was enough of a group for the library tour.

It was 1978, my first visit to the National Library. I was in Secondary Two at Victoria School, and had outgrown the school library's small stash of poetry books, with its mildewed Robert Browning and William Bryant, their stitches undone and gold-embossed spines peeling. I alighted outside the bookstores at Bras Basah, the academic ones doing a roaring trade in text and assessment books, their discount stock spilling over onto the five-footway in crates and boxes. It was here that I bought my first poetry book, *The Albatross Book of Verse*, with a wine-dark cloth cover. It was an anthology that I would dip into every night for a few years before sleep. Miraculously it has ended up in Australia with me, though I don't remember packing it. Somehow a visit to the National Library was never complete without a tour of these bookstores. Your senses were honed, alert and excited, scouring the randomly arranged titles in the shady interior of second-hand stores with names such as Sultana and Modern.



It was at one of these hole-in-the-wall bookshops along Bras Basah Road that the writer Boey Kim Cheng stumbled upon his first book of poetry, *The Albatross Book of Verse*. Old timers will recall bookshops with names such as Sultan and Modern (picture taken in 1972). *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reproduced with permission.

Reading is a physical journey through real space, the place of reading an intrinsic part of the reading experience and memory, a dimension sadly missing in virtual libraries.



A librarian teaching young patrons how to use the catalogue in 1965. All rights reserved. National Library Board Singapore, 2014.



A librarian stamping the due date on a book at the old National Library in 1966. All rights reserved. National Library Board Singapore, 2014.

You could then either take the route across the park to the old Tudor-style YMCA and walk past the National Museum to the library, or stroll down to St Joseph's Institution and cross Bras Basah Road to the *sarabat*-stall-lined Waterloo Street, then ford the busy Stamford Road to a row of low, dingy shophouses and a tin-shed coffeeshop that served the best *mee soto* I have ever tasted, and finally up the steps to the stately but unpretentious and clean red-brick building that is the National Library, graced in front by a stand of royal palms, a canopy of yellow flame, saga and raintrees from Fort Canning just peering over its flat roof.

The building, though unassuming in appearance and size, commanded attention and respect. Next to the grander domed National Museum, facing the Edwardian-style MPH building and the mock Venetian-Renaissance Stamford House up the road, it looked modern, and was criticised for being "out of character" and "forbidding." But its exposed bricks gave it an earthy look, their various shades of red exuding warmth and depth; the medley of rectangle and square art deco white trim windows with jambs extending beyond the bricks and the rectilinear planes made it an honest, elegant and dignified edifice.

I can see myself crossing the covered portico that was supported by brick pillars over the driveway, where cars would drop readers off, and walking up the tiled staircase flanked by brick banisters with slate tops, where teenagers would perch,

chatting or waiting for friends. On the left of the lobby was a bag counter manned by a troupe of Malay attendants; there was a kind-faced old man wearing a *songkok* and his grumpy colleague who shuffled slowly because of a bad leg. In front was the courtyard, paved with cement slabs and fringed by potted plants. A few years before the library was demolished, it was given a facelift that included a fountain with a *fleur de lis* finial as part of the library's overall renovation.

My first impression as I entered the Adult Section was the high windows and the way the sunbeams poured in through the glass and lay in oblong pools on the black and white tiled floor. You could see generous slices of the sky and the crowns of the trees on Fort Canning. Then you heard the cicada chorus filtering through and the whirring of swiveling wall fans; it all made a unique environment for the encounter with life-changing books.

The first stop on the library tour was the catalogue, the heart of the library that was a library in itself. I drew on it often, the thrill of the hunt, the whiff of the quest sharpened as I tried the author, then the subject approach, relishing the glide of the drawers, the neat click as you closed them. There was a set of wooden catalogue drawers that stood apart on a desk, housing entries of special collections, encyclopedias, journals and newspapers. But the primary thrill was letting yourself drift between the shelves, trusting your instinct to home in on the books waiting for your touch, your finger trailing their spines like playing keys, as you travelled the different "realms of gold," to quote John Keats.

I have written elsewhere about how the library's Oxford University Press edition of Keats, with its paper cover bearing a medallion-sized sketch of the poet by English portrait painter Joseph Severn cut out and pasted on the red cardboard cover, and the hardcover edition of Jon Stallworthy's biography of Wilfred Owen, are key influences that have shaped the poet and person I am, but there were many more such encounters in the library, each like Franz Kafka's axe-blow, each book telegraphing its revelatory portent through its aura. You feel all a-tremble, a current surging through your body, a wave bearing you away as you hold the book and surrender to its power.

A good book has potential for conversation and starting on it is like taking the road to Damascus. These are books that seem like messengers from another world washed on our shore, the message in the bottle seemingly intended for us. Henry David Thoreau says: "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading

of a book." There were many moments of tremulous, convulsive, pleasurable discovery between the tall shelves of the library, and for me the memory of reading has become indivisibly entwined with memories of those navigating the aisles, attuned to the intimations of the books that seemed written and waiting for you. From book to book you travel, a memory map being plotted as you go. Reading is a physical journey through real space, the place of reading an intrinsic part of the reading experience and memory, a dimension sadly missing in virtual libraries.

In Stephen Poliakoff's *Shooting the Past*, a thought-provoking television drama about a photographic library and the lives of its librarians as it is threatened with closure, the eccentric Oswald Bates knows exactly where each image is stored, amid the chaotic arrangements of the boxes that make up the collection. He has a physical and emotional relationship with the collection, and makes a desperate bid to keep it from being displaced and dispersed. For him each photograph houses a memory, an archived story to be read and brought to life, and the entire collection is a library of memories.

Perhaps Oswald's extraordinary mental catalogue can be explained by the mnemonic technique inspired by the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos. According to Roman philosopher Cicero, Simonides was at a banquet in Thessaly to present a poem to his host when the roof of the banquet hall collapsed. He had stepped outside when it happened and returned to identify the mangled bodies under the rubble by consulting his visual memory of the seating arrangement around the table. This spatialisation of memory was pivotal to the mnemonics of orators like Cicero, who was able to commit vast tracts of speech to memory by visualising them as inhabiting specific points of a place. St Augustine would later compare memory to a vast storehouse containing all our memories, lived sensations and thoughts, dreams and hopes.

The library is such a storehouse, not only because each book it contains is a work of memory, but more vitally because it contains the memory loci for readers whose lives have been changed by it. The reading experience is not just about establishing a relationship to a book or author, but also a long-term relationship with a library, knowing its character, the promise and sometimes the dangers it holds.

I loved navigating the fiction section on the left side of the room and lingering in the philosophy shelves after it, before moving on to the literature rows to the right. Each section breathed a distinct odour of

promise; the fiction shelves were exciting in their range. I took out all of Dostoevsky's and Kazantzakis', and inhabited the dark nights of St Petersburg and the sun-drenched earth of Crete fully. The air around the philosophy shelves was more sombre, and the books wore a graver odour, a heavy woody whiff with an underlay of acidic tang. Here I entered a sort of dark night of the soul when I picked out Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. A dark oppressive weight descended but at the same time I felt a thrilling sense of discovery, as though the real truth, the Grail awaited me in these books if I had the courage to read them.

Further to the right, perpendicular to the axis of the philosophy section, lay the literature shelves. The English shelves offered visions of the English countryside. I desperately wanted to possess Keats' poems and strangely Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, which I eventually copied out with a fountain pen into a notebook (it was the pre-photocopy age). Behind the Anglo-American literature shelves, across from the wall section of art-books, was a small collection of world literature in translation. I remember leaning against the metal bookcase, poring over Vincente Aleixandre and Odysseus Elytis' poems, the afternoon light from the windows acquiring an exquisite, sensual Mediterranean quality as I stood immersed in the poems from a foreign world. Here too, I sniffed out Pablo Neruda's *Residence on Earth* and was mesmerised by the deep chords that rise from the farthest, deepest places of the human soul and experience. The book had an earthy feel to it, with its comfortable weight, its cut pages and a dust cover with a monotone image of what must be the rugged mountains of the Chilean coast.

Then I found Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*; it had a salmon-pink dust cover with stark letters and no image, one of the books that strike like disaster, to use Kafka's words, at the heart of the reader, for it intensified the existentialist phase of my reading. It was a difficult, searching time; the library became a refuge when the sense of alienation in a school that placed emphasis on the sciences and trouble at home made me an outsider who sought to stay away from home and school as much as possible. Reading Camus strangely lent me a sense of strength; Sisyphus rolling his rock up the hill again and again as a form of rebellion was grim inspiration: "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

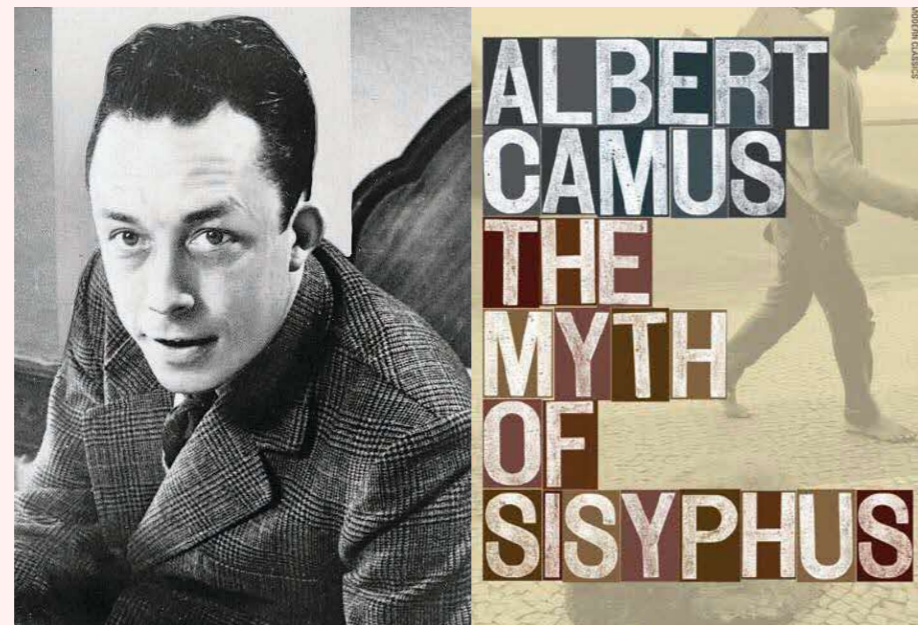
I went to the catalogue and tracked down more Camus. *The Outsider* was in the fiction section, *The Rebel* in philosophy, *Lyrical and Critical Essays* in

the French literature section. This reflects the challenge of classification but also underscores the physical act of reading, the routes you take to get from book to book. Like *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *Essays* was plain and austere in appearance, with just the letters in stark relief. I have since bought a pre-read paperback copy of it in Thessaloniki in a bookstore of mostly Greek books, a cover with a portrait of Camus in discussion, leaning forward with his penetrating gaze and hands spread to underscore a point. From these essays, especially the ones set in Algiers, I derived a sense of stoic calm, even joy, as I struggled in my youthful dark night. The tenet "There is no love of life without despair of it" has been a shaping belief.

In *Time Regained*, Marcel Proust remarks of the relationship between reading and memory:

If, ever in thought, I take up François le Champi in the library, immediately a child rises within me and replaces me, who alone has the right to read that title François le Champi and who reads it as he read it then with the same impression of the weather out in the garden, with the same old dreams about countries and life, the same anguish of the morrow.

Wandering the aisles of books in my memory, I can sense the dreams, aspirations and despair of the youth who was seeking companionship, meaning and salvation in the books that drew him ineluctably into their worlds.

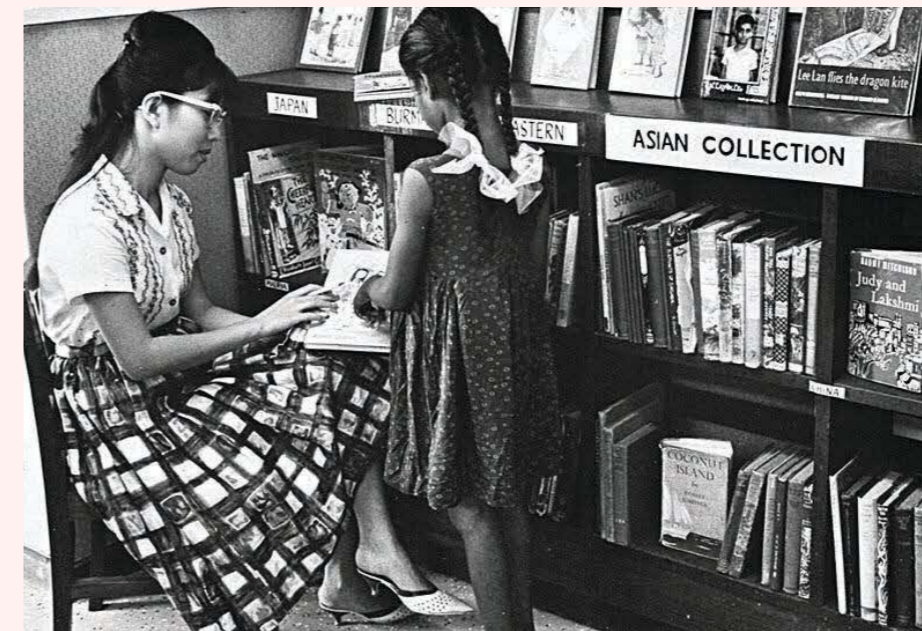


The writings of French Nobel laureate author Albert Camus (1913–1960), especially *The Myth of Sisyphus*, made a deep impression on Boey Kim Cheng during his formative years. It spurred him to read several of Camus' other books. Left: *Portrait from New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection, 1957*. Right: *Cover image all rights reserved, Penguin, London, 2000*.

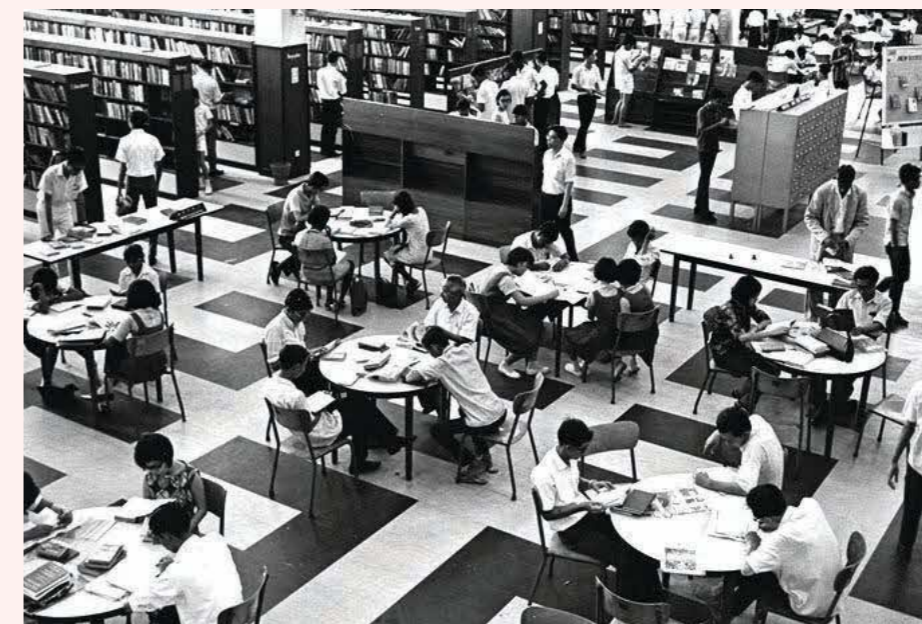
I remember reading Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and pondering his insights into Wagner and then going upstairs to the audio-visual section of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library to listen to *Parsifal* and the *Ring Cycle*. I started alternating between the fan-cooled Adult Section and the air-conditioned Reference Library. I sifted the catalogue of the audio-visual section and filled up request slips for vinyl treasures. The librarian would direct me to a listening booth and go into a backroom where the records were stored. I had discovered Mahler at the British Council Library opposite Clifford Pier, and here at the National Library I listened to his Third Symphony after reading *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. It was a heady mix, and for days something akin to delirium possessed me, the secret truth of Nietzsche's "Midnight Song" scored deeply in Mahler's notes. But there was also the anxiety that had been accumulating since I had started reading Keats, the fear that I was taking a path less-travelled and the way ahead was fraught with uncertainty and pain.

One day I set out from the National Library to the British Council Library with a copy of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* in my schoolbag. The two libraries had become key reference points between which my reading and life took their bearings; the routes and distances between them now provide the measures of memory. It was a daily ritual, starting out from the National Library after spending the afternoon there, walking past Capitol Cinema, across High Street to the Singapore River, where flotillas

Wandering the aisles of books in my memory, I can sense the dreams, aspirations and despair of the youth who was seeking companionship, meaning and salvation in the books that drew him ineluctably into their worlds.



Patrons browsing through the Asian Children's collection at the National Library on Stamford Road. All rights reserved. National Library Board Singapore, 2014.



The lending section of the old National Library in 1962. All rights reserved. National Library Board Singapore, 2014.

of *tongkangs* were berthed. My head was full of Rimbaud, my senses reeling from his intoxicating lines. The chugging of *tongkangs* carrying goods to the godowns upstream and empty ones going out to the harbour, their wide wakes slapping gently the slimy steps and pilings, the composite smell of bilges, mud and salt water, the reek of oil and timber hanging in the air, and the afternoon light percussive on the khaki-coloured tides gave me Rimbaud's "disorientation of the senses." I felt I was on the cusp of something, a sense of trespass and uplift; I wasn't afraid anymore of the life of poetry, of the danger and solitude it meant. That night, after reading at the window seat in the British Council Library, looking up occasionally from *Four Quartets* at the transactions outside Change Alley, and across at Clifford Pier and the boats at anchor in the roads, I walked to the Cavanagh Bridge, which was deserted and dim-lit after office hours, and celebrated that day of epiphany by lighting up my first cigarette.

Here in the Asiatic Society reading room, Miss Mishra hands me the 12th volume of *Asiatic Researches or Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal for Inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences and Literature, of Asia*. I hold its worn leather cover, thrilled to find on its title page that it was published in 1818, on the eve of Raffles' arrival in Singapore. I have thumbed through the catalogue and found Raffles' article "On the Maláyu Nation, with a Translation of its Maritime Institutions." Touching the antique leaves, which are riddled with perforations in some places, the route of memory seems to have touched home. Raffles can be credited with the founding of the National Library, though its predecessor the Raffles Library, created in 1823, was open only to the British.

Feeling and smelling the aged paper, the old National Library is no longer a ghostly memory, a black hole that has swallowed up the reading history of a nation, the reading memories of generations of readers. Over the tunnel that seems such poor justification for the library's removal, the reassuring red-brick building stands on the rise towards Fort Canning, beckoning to the skinny boy in slippers walking up its wide steps, its shelves calling with books that seem to read and write his life as he reads, and somewhere along the journey memory and reading will become one, as he wanders the tall aisles of books, waiting to be found in the library of memory. ♦

Notes

¹ White-out is a brand of correction fluid.

MY MEMORIES

Each book is a memory, a reminder of the person we were when we read it. Here, Claire Tham shares with us the books she remembers – the ones that shaped her thoughts and her writing, and ultimately the person she became.

My mother worked Saturday mornings when I was a child in the 1970s; my father did not. Left with two children to entertain, my father would take my sister and I every Saturday morning to a bookshop or the National Library.

The first bookshop I remember clearly was a neighbourhood shop in Tiong Bahru, where my grandparents lived. The first thing you saw when you entered was a line of Enid Blyton books strung up by clothes pegs above a wooden table on which yet more Blyton books were laid out like tiles.

Of course, Blyton has gone out of fashion now. Her critics accuse her of wooden prose, stereotyped characters and political incorrectness. All true, perhaps, and yet, for me and other children of the 1970s, she was our passport to reading, to an idyllic England of boarding schools where children were never homesick, of midnight feasts, picnics and adventures in an English countryside free of paedophiles and other contemporary dangers. She made me, for a time, want to be a detective; I would buy small blue notebooks from the school bookshop and jot down car numbers and descriptions of people I saw in the street, in the wistful hope that some of them might be criminals and that I might play some small part in catching them.

I had a very English childhood, at least in the books that I read. There were few local books written in those days, almost none written for children. I read what I could lay my hands on and, like Blyton's books, these were mostly by English and, to a lesser extent, American authors. For a time I could not get enough of a series called *The Chalet Girls*, about an English school established in the Alps in the pre-World War II years. There were

other books too – *The Secret Garden*, *The Little Princess*, *The Railway Children* – all describing a Victorian and Edwardian England far removed from my own life in Singapore.

And there was Charles Dickens, of course. I was introduced to him through the musical *Oliver!* but my favourite was *David Copperfield*, which seemed to distil all that was best about Dickens – his unabashed fondness for melodrama and cliffhangers, his outrage at any kind of injustice, a sense of the absurd that went hand in hand with a desire to puncture all forms of pomposity or hypocrisy. I have not read Dickens in years but his writing, with its circumlocutions and its waterfall style – subordinate clause chasing subordinate clause, all building up to some towering, absurd punchline – has had a powerful influence on my own writing. I would like to write like Raymond Carver (who doesn't?) but always end up imitating Dickens.

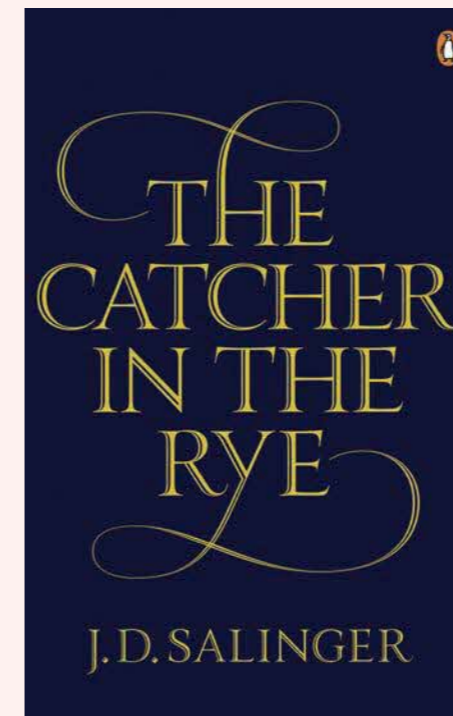
Around the same time – when I was about 11 or 12 – I discovered Agatha Christie, which sparked a lifelong taste for detective novels and thrillers. Like Blyton, Christie seems to have gone out of critical fashion and, indeed, her most famous creations, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, never rise above the level of caricature. Yet her books were irresistible; I could easily get through a couple of Agatha Christies a day. Fortunately, Christie was a prolific writer who kept me happily supplied with paperbacks throughout secondary school. I remember little of the plots, though her best books (*Ten Little Indians*, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*) set a bar for denouement and twists that, even now, have not been bettered; in her best books, too, she was capable of a psychological insight into her characters' motivations that transcended the serviceable writing. The England of the interwar years she depicted

was also central to the atmosphere of her books – in that orderly, structured society, murder had the resonance of genuine evil which, after all, was what it was.

Blyton, *Chalet Girls*, Dickens, Christie, Dorothy Sayers, L.P. Hartley, P.G. Wodehouse – these quintessentially English writers shaped my childhood imagination indelibly and stamped the contours of pre-war England forever in my consciousness so that when I finally visited London the city seemed as familiar as a recurring dream.

My literary love affair with England culminated in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, that paean to a vanished English aristocratic Catholic family which remains, even now, one of my favourite books. I came to the book via the Granada television series but discovered the book itself – its youthful, comic exuberance yielding to a growing, almost unbearable sense of loss – was even better. Many of my younger self's favourite books have fallen by the wayside, but this is the one that has endured.

OF READING



The Catcher in the Rye was written by J.D. Salinger in 1951. Cover by Penguin, London, 2010.

Before the advent of the internet, every trip to the library was like a treasure hunt; you never knew what you might find.

I turned away from English fiction in my teenage years – too stuffy, too stultifying, too censored I thought. I worked my way through much of the canon of American literature for Disaffected Teens: *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, *On the Road*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Franny and Zooey*, *The Bell Jar* and others. (I was told *Catcher* was banned in Singapore, yet it was available in the library; many books that were supposedly banned were, oddly, available in the library.) Later, it would strike me that women and girls always got a raw deal in these books but, as a teenager, it didn't matter to me. (In real life, I might have been a girl but in my literary imagination I was always a man!)

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance was hard work to get through, *On the Road*, despite its lyrical prose, only marginally less so. I had more luck with *The Great Gatsby*, a cinematically mauled book that, given the number of people professing love for it, seems too clichéd to mention as a favourite. Yet it was, for a long time. It is one of those books that is so perfect in every way – a miniaturist's perfection as it were – that reading it almost feels like gliding over water.

The Catcher in the Rye, when I first read it, was like a sock to the eye, a punch to the gut. I suppose almost every disaffected teenager who reads it for the first time has the sensation that Holden Caulfield is speaking directly, *personally*, to his or her problems. "Phony", for a time, became my favourite catchphrase, liberally applied to everyone and everything just as, only a few years before "fathead" had been the ultimate insult. I suspect if I were to read it now, I would find its 1950s milieu and idiom curiously dated and Holden Caulfield an American Peter Pan who refuses to grow up.

My American phase continued well into my 20s and 30s. I read a lot of American short story writers: the usual suspects, although for some reason Hemingway never clicked with me. He was too terse, too macho. What I liked about American fiction was its perennial optimism; there was a kind of ragged hopefulness which the vast cities and endless landscapes seemed to foster in even the most self-destructive characters.

As I got older, though, I turned back to the English writers I had tried to read when I was younger and who had seemed incomprehensible to me then. I got through most of Graham Greene, who combined a keen sense for writing thrillers with world-weary characters in exotic locations. I went back to Evelyn Waugh and read *A Handful of Dust*: it was both very funny and the most bleakly horrifying thing I had ever read.

Bookshops, while I was growing up, lacked the range of a Kinokuniya or Amazon. I got many of my books the old-fashioned way: from the old National Library on Stamford Road, before it was razed to make way for the Fort Canning tunnel. What I chiefly remember about the old National Library were the long queues on Saturday mornings to return and check out books (how quaint, today's children must think, to have your books manually stamped!) and the smell of mildewing paper in the non-airconditioned interior that hit you as soon as you stepped in.

Someone told me once that her daughter never went to the library because the books were torn and dirty. Dirty, torn books have never bothered me, (perhaps because I have a high tolerance for dirt). Before the advent of the internet, every trip to the library was like a treasure hunt; you never knew what you might find. (And the National Library was more high-minded in those days; I don't recall a single bestseller gracing its shelves.) Two books discovered through this desultory browsing stick in my mind. The first was *The German Lesson* by German author Siegfried Lenz, a slow-moving, evocative novel that beautifully conflated a difficult father-son relationship with Germany's difficult relationship with its Nazi past. Another accidental find was Robert Sabatier, a French author who wrote a series of idyllic books about a child's experience of Paris during the interwar years. When I visit the National Library now, there is still a part of me that hopes to find another *German Lesson* or Robert Sabatier but knowing that I probably won't makes me treasure such reading discoveries as one of the serendipitous joys of my youth.

Reading, bookshops, libraries – they made up a significant part of my childhood and brought me endless solace and enjoyment. They still do. ♦



Singaporean writer and Oxford University law alumni **Claire Tham** has written several award-winning short story collections as well as full length novels. Her stories have been adapted for both television and theatre. Her most recent work *The Inlet*, was published by Ethos Books in 2013.

A JOURNEY INTO MEMORY

Meira Chand shares with us her experience writing *A Different Sky*; what it was like to study the memories of others – and what it was like to make them hers.



Meira Chand was born in London of Swiss-Indian parentage and lived in Japan and India before making Singapore her home in 1997. Her latest novel, *A Different Sky* was long-listed for the Impac Dublin award in 2012, and also made it to Oprah Winfrey's recommended reading list. She has a PhD in Creative Writing and is actively involved in promoting young writers in Singapore.

The filmmaker Luis Bunuel wrote, "Memory is what makes our lives. Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing."¹

As a writer I know the importance of subconscious memory, a deep well into which the writer lets down a small bucket to draw up something usually beyond reach. These shadows are stirred by the writer's experience and from the mixture a work of creativity is formed. Our stories connect us to our past, and memory is always of the past. Without memory we cannot reflect upon ourselves and our inner lives. All novels are written from this place of memory, be it a personal memory, a national, tribal, racial memory, or the dark and mysterious archetypal memory shared by all of humanity. A seemingly bottomless well of memory upon which to draw intuitively is a prerequisite for a writer of fiction. Our deepest and most instinctive memories are formed in childhood, and make us who we are.

In 2010 I published a new novel, *A Different Sky*. The novel is set in pre-independence Singapore and covers the era of colonial times, the bitter experiences of World War II, the Japanese occupation and the post-war struggle for independence. When I decided to embark on this book, I had not been long in Singapore and knew little of the region or culture. Yet, once a seed is sown within a writer's head, it is difficult to dislodge.

The first disquieting thing I discovered as I began my journey into *A Different Sky* was that I had no personal memory of the place I was writing about. I shared nothing of its history or its complex social structure.

I had no larger memory shaped by the traumas and trivialities of childhood, by cultural uniqueness, no residue within me of family tales handed down by relatives, no gossip overheard, no ancestral village in China or India. I did not know the smells of a *kampong* or the taste of *laksa*. I did not have a great grandmother with bound feet; I had not hidden at the sound of soldiers during the war nor ridden in a rickshaw. I had never heard of a mosquito bus or received an *ang pao* at Chinese New Year.

We are all surrounded by our own lives, by where we have been born and where we have travelled to, both geographically and emotionally. We have to survive our own histories if we are to write at all. The novelist writes not to escape life, but to pin it down, pulling it up into the light through the mysterious waters of memory. With Singapore, however, I was beached upon dry land. *A Different Sky* is a historical novel and this genre has its own special problems. A story and its characters may be fictional, but the reality of place, culture, a specific time in history and true events are all inflexible facts and cannot be altered, but have to be convinc-

ingly portrayed. Meticulous research is the key to attempting such conviction and I assiduously set about this job. I thrashed around for a long time talking to people, trawling through old newspapers of the time, reading memoir and history books – reading, reading, reading (and absorbing) – the words, the opinions, and the emotions of others.

And I unashamedly mined the Oral History Department of the National Archives. Here, through recorded personal interviews, was a wonderful cross-section of Singapore's multicultural communities, all assiduously catalogued, subject-by-subject, reel-by-reel. Some interviews were transcribed, and this was most useful, but most of all I liked to put on the headphones and listen to the babble of numerous voices tied to multiple lives and experiences and let these work through me.

The process of working things through me is an important one. Some interviewees, whose stories I listened to time and time again, began to feel like old friends. Each encounter left its residue within me. In time, through reading and listening, I found I was building a memory of sorts upon the memo-

We have to survive our own histories if we are to write at all. The novelist writes not to escape life, but to pin it down, pulling it up into the light through the mysterious waters of memory.

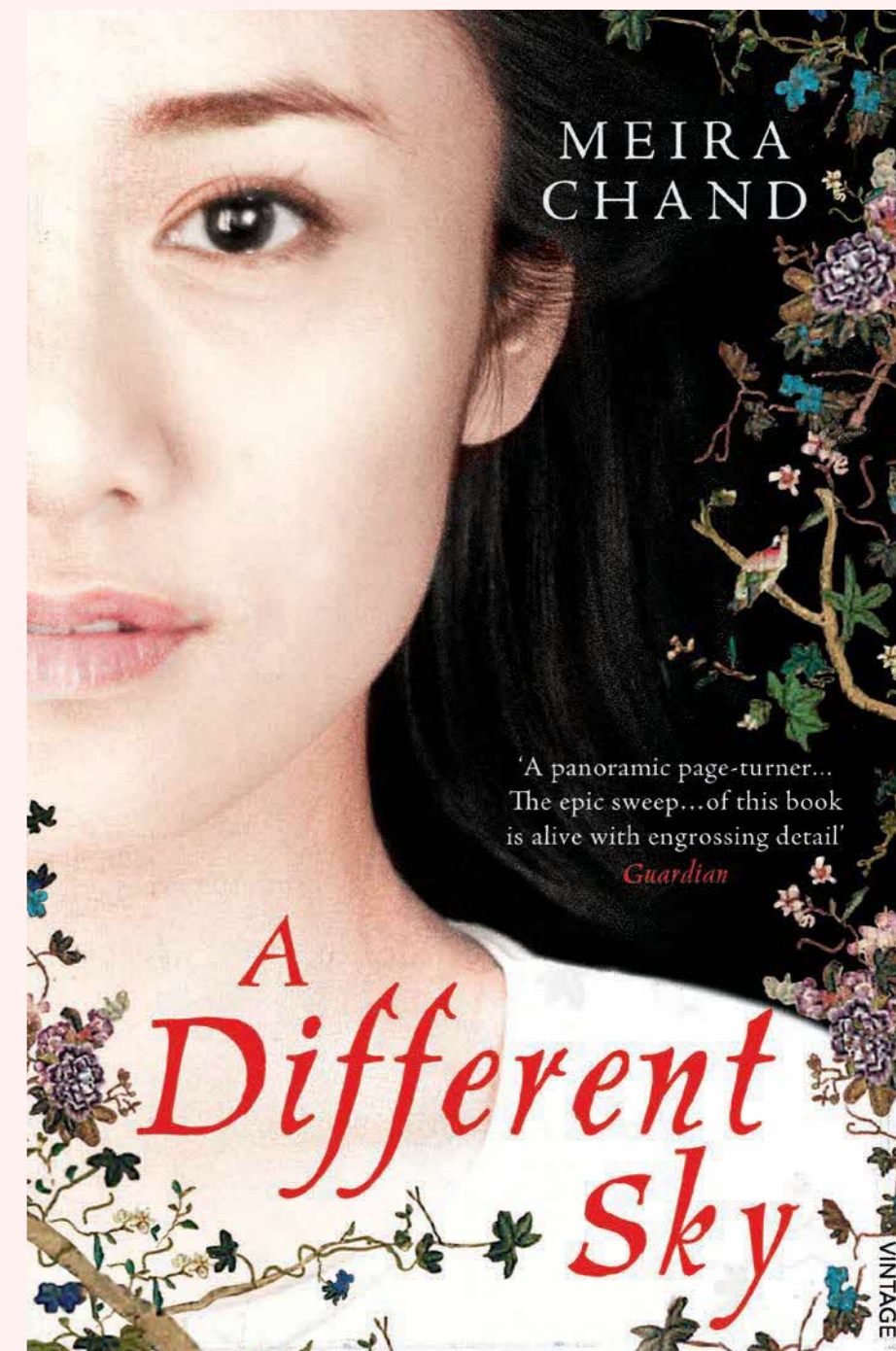
ries of other people; I had become a receptacle of received emotions and experiences. The Singapore memory I was acquiring was at first insubstantial and narrow as a sunbeam when compared to the all-pervasive sun. Yet, I hoped it would be enough for the work at hand. It took me a long time to gain the confidence to start writing, recreating a past of the imagination.

I spent many months finding my way into this new book. I wrote almost 200 pages, but it did not feel right; the structure of history was adequately in place, but my characters had no life; I seemed to be writing a history book rather than a novel. Every day spent at my desk was laboured and difficult. Whatever the problems of writing without memory, I knew that this was not the problem. I put the manuscript away for several months. Then, one night, I awoke at 2am with words crowding my head and my characters waiting for me at a place I had not anticipated ever meeting them. The words in my head had rhythm and lightness and soared ahead of me, picking up with ease the strangest of details. I got up and began at once to write. And I knew then that suddenly now I had found my voice. I was free within my own skin.

In a sense literature is not so much about structure, plotting or the use of device; literature is about a voice. Voice is not style. A voice comes from deep within the writer and speaks directly into the reader's ear in its own distinctive way. Writers write for many reasons, and according to the poet Al Alvarez, one of those reasons is that writers fall under the spell of language at an impressionable age and can never escape. He says, "In order to write you must first listen...something writers have in common with their readers. Reading well means opening your ears to the presence behind the words."²

We read fiction primarily for the pleasure of being told a story and being able to enter and imagine new worlds. The reader follows the writer into unknown realms, and will emerge from the journey with expanded experience, new perspectives and a deeper understanding of life. I had read well as a researcher, I had opened myself to memory and experience not my own, immersing them within myself. But, until I experienced that 2am epiphany, I could not yet speak in a convincing voice of the places I had been.

I realised then that I had started writing before I had completely digested the Singapore memory built up through research. It had not yet become 'my memory', an instinctive knowledge within me, like the real memories we all possess from our formative years. False and narrow though this memory was, not until it



was completely absorbed, could I throw it over my shoulder and draw upon it unconsciously. Only then could I turn researched fact into convincing fiction.

Historical truth, as far as we can understand it, rests not only upon recorded fact, but also upon the imaginative extension of our understanding of those facts. While historical record constructs the shape of the past, fiction creates a sense of experience. Now with my new-found voice, I could at last call to the reader to listen, so that together we might relive an important memory, bringing it to life in the present, and illuminating its enduring relevance to ourselves in the way that only fiction can conjure. ♦

A Different Sky was written by Meira Chand in 2010. Cover image courtesy of Meira Chand, published by Random House, UK.

Notes

¹ Luis Bunuel, *My last sigh: The autobiography of Luis Bunuel* (London: Vintage, 2013): 2

² Al Alvarez, *The Writer's Voice* (London: Bloomsbury 2005): 11

FIRST WORDS

WOMEN POETS

FROM SINGAPORE

Poems written by Singapore's women writers in the 1950s to 1970s depict both their personal and national struggles. Gracie Lee highlights these poets and the literary works that captured the sentiment of the times.

Gracie Lee is a Senior Librarian with the National Library. She was involved in the curation of the Singapore Literary Pioneers Gallery and in the compilation of *Singapore Literature in English: An Annotated Bibliography* (2008).

From Hedwig Aroozoo's parodies of 1950s Singapore politics to Angeline Yap's poetic responses to nationhood, the verses of Singapore's early women poets have engaged our imagination, emotions and intellect, enlarged our understanding of the human condition, and enriched the literary and cultural heritage of Singapore. It is hoped that this overview of poetry written by Singapore women in the 1950s–70s will stir the interest of readers to explore the wealth of local literature available in the National Library's Singapore collection.

HEDWIG AROOZOO (1928–)

During the 1950s, the University of Malaya – now the National University of Singapore (NUS) – was fertile ground for creative expression when Singapore attained self-government and later nationhood. Grippled by rising nationalistic fervour, a group of English-educated students sought to create literary works and to find an appropriate idiom that would express the culture, landscape and identity of the Singapore-Malaya Union. Academics have identified this developmental phase as the beginning of Singapore literature in English.

One of the earliest women poets of this period was Hedwig Anuar *nee* Aroozoo. As a literature student at the University of Malaya, she contributed one of her early poems "A Rhyme in Time" (later republished as "Fragments of a Wasteland" in 1999) to the *Malayan Undergrad*, a student journal, in 1951. The poem, which examines colonial Singapore languishing in the embers of the British Empire, was conceptualised as a satirical piece for a class exercise on T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and later anthologised in *Litmus One*, the first anthology of Malayan verses in 1958. The poem was singled out by leading Malaysian poet Ee Tiang Hong as a work that "merits a place in any anthology of Malaysian poetry that has a historical import".¹



Hedwig Aroozoo was not only one of Singapore's earliest female poets, but also the director of the National Library of Singapore from 1960 to 1988. *Photography by Sean Lee.*

After graduation, Aroozoo furthered her studies in London where she co-edited *Suara Merdeka* the organ of the Malayan Forum. This was a political discussion group formed by Malayan students in London and its alumni include political luminaries such as Goh Keng Swee, Lee Kuan Yew and Toh Chin Chye. Several of Aroozoo's political parodies appeared in this newsletter. "Love Match" (1956), a satirical piece on the merger of Singapore and the Federation of Malaya, was one of them. This piece drew its inspiration from then Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock's comment to the press on his return from discussions with Tengku Abdul Rahman on a possible union between Singapore and Malaya. He said, "Well, gentlemen,

the love-making has started. As you know yourselves, once you start making love, there are always chances of a marriage." Aroozoo seized on this analogy of courtship and matrimony to depict the political bartering and complexities of merger. In this poem, Singapore is personified as the lady, and Malaya the gentleman.

The lady says she's willing
She declares the prospect thrilling,
But the gentleman isn't quite so sure.
He's not quite so romantic,
He's driving her quite frantic –
Can it be that she lacks enough allure?

(Lines 1–6; *Under the Apple Tree*, p. 16.)

Though Aroozoo was a contemporary of well-known historian Wang Gungwu, who belonged to a group of pioneering writers, she is not perceived as part of that circle for her writing was primarily a private endeavour. Her poems have mainly appeared in non-literary journals, many were never published, and some (such as her love poems) were even destroyed. After graduation, Aroozoo went on to carve out an illustrious career as the Director of the National Library and discontinued her poetry writing. It was only in 1999 that her published poems were gathered and re-introduced in *Under the Apple Tree: Political Parodies of the 1950s*.

WONG MAY (1944–)

As higher education in English was rare in the early years, creative writing in English was scarce right up to the mid-1960s. This is even more apparent in Singapore women's writing as women had far less educational opportunities than men. In Edwin Thumboo's seminal anthology on Singapore and Malaysia poetry, *The Second Tongue* (1976), he writes: "Women are now beginning to enjoy professional and intellectual parity with men...Before the mid-sixties, very few women wrote creatively; there were no women among the pioneer poets. Wong May and Lee Geok Lan [Malaysian] were about the first."² He also adds that "women have contributed positively to that shift in the choice and treatment of theme from the public to the personal" and have also introduced "delicate" nuances to the poetic language. The nascent growth of women writers from the mid-1960s onwards was noticed by NUS academics Rajeer Patke and Philip Holden as well. In their survey of pre-1965 Malaysian and Singapore writing, Wong May, Daisy Chan Heng Chee, Theresa Ng and Lee Tzu Pheng were cited as leading women poets of this period.



In 1999, Hedwig Aroozoo's published poems were collected and released in *Under the Apple Tree*. *All rights reserved, National Library Board Singapore, 2014.*

Wong May occupies an interesting place in Singapore literature. Born in Chongqing, China in 1944, she was raised in Singapore and received her Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Singapore (now NUS). She left Singapore to study in the United States in 1966 and eventually settled in Dublin, Ireland. A contemporary of Arthur Yap and Robert Yeo, her early poems appeared in *Focus: the Journal of the University of Malaya's Literary Society* and in several key anthologies on Singapore and Malaysian writings such as *The Flowering Tree* (1970), *Seven Poets* (1973) and *The Second Tongue*. Though Wong went on to publish three collections of poems overseas, *A Bad Girl's Book of Animals* (1969), *Reports* (1972) and *Superstitions* (1978), only her early poems in Singapore are entered into discussion as national literature. Nevertheless, her place in Singapore's canon of writers is undisputed.

In the introduction to his anthology *A Private Landscape* (1967) David Ormerod lauds Wong May as a "powerful and valid voice" who has the potential to lead the development of English-language poetry in Malaysia and Singapore.³ The blurb on her first book of poetry provides further evidence of this close association with Singapore; her place of birth was erroneously printed as Singapore. Wong's fourth volume of poems *Picasso's Tears* is due to be released in 2014.

Aside from her nationality, Wong's place in Singapore literature is made more complex by the type of poetry she writes.

Most of her poems are concerned with the personal and are universal in their treatment of the subject matter. Only a handful of poems such as "This Fine Day" and "Study of a Millionaire: Still Life" contain recognisable Chinese or local references.

Despite her obscurity from the general reading public, Wong's poems have been well-received by critics locally and abroad, receiving descriptions such as quirky, unpredictable, intense, graceful and otherworldly. Stylistically, her poems are marked by silences – a quality Wong terms as "wordlessness",⁴ which she relies on to convey the limitations of language in communication and in establishing human connection. She also adopts an intriguing elliptical structure in a number of her poems. These traits are visible in poems such as "The Shroud", a poem on the loss of childhood innocence:

The old school uniform
With the little childish delights and giggles
Is folded and locked up in the top drawer
Forever.

Shall I cry?
I am no longer a child
My eyes so dry
It's not easy to cry.

Yet I hear somebody weeping –
Crying louder and louder – howling
I feel her tears –
She is the girl locked up in the top drawer.

(Lines 9–20; *Seven Poets*, p. 111)

LEE TZU PHENG (1946-)

Like Wong May, Lee Tzu Pheng is a writer who eschews the public role of the poet for the private. She has published five volumes of poetry to date: *Prospect of a Drowning* (1980); *Against the Next Wave* (1988); *The Brink of An Amen* (1991); *Lambada by Galilee and Other Surprises* (1997); and *Catching Connections: Poems, Prosexcusions, Crucifications* (2012).

Lee enjoyed early success, winning prizes for her poems "Present from the Past" (1966) and "My Country and My People" (1967) as an undergraduate at the University of Singapore where she read literature under Professor D. J. Enright. (An accomplished poet in his own right, Enright's literary contributions have been largely overshadowed by his high profile altercation with the government for his critique of Singapore's cultural policy in the "Enright Affair".)

Lee's poems first appeared in literary journals such as *Focus* and *Poetry Singapore* and anthologies such as *The Flowering Tree*. They were collected and released as a collection in her debut volume *Prospect of a Drowning* in 1980. The collection brings together 38 poems written between 1966 and 1973 when she was an undergraduate and graduate student. She took a long hiatus from creative writing in 1973 and returned to the craft only in 1987.

Regarded as one of the founding triumvirate of poetry in Singapore (Edwin Thumboo and Arthur Yap being the other two) and a national poet, Lee does not, however, "consciously set out to write something representative of the nation".⁵ Instead she crafts poems from contemplations on her inner world and her observations of everyday life. Her poems reveal a keen sensitivity to language and an emotional honesty with the subject matter. Thumboo notes that her poems are "neither over- nor under-written"⁶ and Patke and Holden commend her "voice of steady thoughtfulness", and her ability to "dwell on feelings without risking exhibitionism or sentimentality".⁷ Although Lee's inclinations are toward her internal world, Patke argues that she is not merely a poet of the private voice for her oeuvre explores the realms of the personal, socio-political and spiritual.

No discussion on Lee is complete without reference to "My Country and My People". Intended to be a personal piece that Lee wrote for herself, the poem has since been lauded as a national poem though it had been, ironically, banned from the airwaves in the 1970s, supposedly for its reference to "brown-skinned neighbours". The famous opening lines to her poem continue to resonate with generations of Singaporeans,



Cultural medallion recipient (1985), Lee Tzu Pheng, is one of Singapore's most distinguished poets. All rights reserved. Eric Foo Chee Meng 1979-2001. Courtesy of National Arts Council Singapore.

unerringly capturing the ambivalence and contradictions of being Singaporean: "My country and my people/ are neither here nor there, nor/ in the comfort of my preferences/ if I could even choose". The poem goes on to explore the poet's disquiet with the disappearance of nostalgic familiar places that have made way for the sterile ubiquitous city and material progress. At the close of the poem, the poet turns the discourse around by reversing the order of the opening lines with: "I claim citizenship in your recognition/ of our kind./ My people, and my country,/ are you, and you my home." Here, she asserts her personal vision that it is the kinship among neighbours that makes Singapore both a country and a home. The success of "My Country and My People" has been attributed to Lee's ability to conflate her internal and external realities, bringing together personal and public histories, giving meaning to the larger political context through the experience of the individual.

CHUNG YEE CHONG (1950-)

Chung Yee Chong was another promising poet in the 1960s and 70s. She exited from the local literary scene after she left Singapore. Born in Hong Kong, Chung lived in Indonesia before moving to Singapore where her father took up a teaching post in Nanyang University (now the Nanyang Technological University). She developed her love for poetry writing during her pre-university days at Serangoon Secondary School under the guidance of Arthur Yap who was her English teacher. In an interview, Chung recalled that she was seized by the writing bug, finishing one poem a day

and publishing her first poem in a school magazine. She continued writing when she entered university and her works have appeared in *Focus* and anthologies such as *The Flowering Tree* and *The Second Tongue*.

The majority of her works (23 poems altogether) was published in *Five Takes* (1974), which features the poems of five poets. She was the only woman among the five which included Sng Boh Khim, Arthur Yap, Yeo Bock Cheng and Robert Yeo. After graduating with Honours in English in 1973, Chung worked as a copywriter at various advertising agencies before settling in the United Kingdom where she gained success as a painter. Chung continues to live and work in the United Kingdom as an artist. Though she has not released any poem since, she did publish a novel set in communist China titled *The Bitter Sea* in 2012.

Chung's poems delve into a range of subjects, though man-woman relationships and the passage of time are recurrent themes. The poem titled "10 a.m. - a wife's report" offers us a glimpse of the latent talent present in her creative writings.

early
in the morning
I noticed: you left
and took with you
the scent of after-shave lotion
tobacco, and whatever else i cannot define
except this sense that
somehow you have wrung out
my life
with the towel you hung
to let dry

[Lines 1-11; *Five Takes*, p. 28]

MARGARET LEONG (1921-2012)

Margaret Leong's transient affiliation with Singapore puts her in the same league with Wong May and Chung Yee Chong. A white American expatriate who married a Malayan Chinese, Leong came to Singapore in 1949 with her journalist husband. She taught at the St Anthony's Convent and was an advocate in the local literary scene. She was also a prolific writer. During her 14-year stay here, she published at least seven known literary works: *The Air Above the Tamarinds* (1957); *Rivers to Senang* (1958); *My First Book of Poems* (1958); *Songs of Malaya* (1959); *The Shamen's Ring* (1961); and *Coral Sands Volumes 1 and 2* (publication year unknown). *My Second Book of Poems* (1977) was published after she left Singapore for her home state of Missouri in 1963. She continued to be active in the literary scene after her return to America and founded the New York Literary Society Press. She passed away in Columbia, Missouri, in 2012.

Dubbed a "Malayan poet"⁸ and a "Singapore poetess"⁹ by the press, Leong's lyrical poems are endowed with a rich local flavour that is shaped and informed by the poet's fascination with the sights and sounds of the region's flora, fauna, customs and ways of living. Her poems are infused with romanticised images of the Malayan landscapes and its inhabitants. Some of the place poems on Singapore include "The Japanese Cemetery", "Tomb of Iskandar Shah", "Raffles Quadrangle", "Rainbow at Changi", "Jurong" and "By Tanah Merah". Much of her work was written for children and youths, with the exceptions of *The Air Above the Tamarinds* and *Rivers of Senang*. For instance, *My First Book of Poems* was written for 10-year-olds and used as a primary school textbook. Writer and academic Shirley Geok-lin Lim believes that for this reason, her works have received little critical attention from scholars. This omission has, however, been addressed with the anthologising of her poems in *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* (2009), and the republication of her juvenile poems in *The Ice Ball Man and Other Poems* (2011). The following extract from "Pasir Ris-Sunset" illustrates the keen Malayan sensibility that she evoked in her poetry:

Where the kelong cuts across the sea
Like a wooden-handled kris
There is a mellifluous song
In the seas off Pasir Ris

[Lines 9-12;
The Air Above the Tamarinds, p. 17]



Margaret Leong's works were infused with the sights and sounds of Malaya. She was an accomplished writer and educator. All rights reserved, National Library Board Singapore, 2014.

GERALDINE HENG (1954-)

Geraldine Heng's *Whitedreams* (1976) lays claim as the first book of poetry in English written by a Singapore woman that is published in Singapore. The collection contains 30 poems on various subjects, with a number that focus on the experiences of a woman: her moods, feelings and relationships. Reflecting her feminist leanings, Heng also led the compilation of the first anthology of writing by Singapore women, *The Sun in Her Eyes: Stories* (1976).

At an early age, Heng was winning essay competitions and taking on assignments as a freelance writer in local student magazines. After graduation, she lectured at NUS and was also an active participant in the local literary scene as a poet, reviewer and moderator at seminars. She eventually left Singapore and began an academic career in medieval literature in the United States. Today, she is an associate professor at the University of Texas, Austin, where she continues to teach and research on medieval literature.

Heng's poems have appeared in various periodicals such as *Commentary*, *New Directions* and *Singa* and have been anthologised in *The Second Tongue*, *Singapore Writing* and *Articulations*. Praised for her "fine feeling" and use of "appropriate idioms",¹⁰ Heng's facility with words can be seen in poems such as "Little Things" that expresses child-like delight with the Chinese mooncake and lantern festival:

we were a crooked line of giggling children
untidy-happy
delight burning on our faces
brighter than the muted flickers of light
straining to be released
from paint-gay lanterns
earnest hands tightly clutched
bamboo rods from which hung
our lives and souls and
concentration

[Lines 1-10; *Whitedreams*, p. 30]



Geraldine Heng is an associate professor at the University of Texas, Austin. Her work has earned her six research fellowships to date. Courtesy of Geraldine Heng.

NALLA TAN (1923–2012) AND ROSALY PUTHUCHEARY (1936–)

Nalla Tan and Rosaly Puthucheary were two prolific women writers in the 1970s. Though their works have not achieved critical standing, they are mentioned in this article for their contributions to the production of women writing.

Born in Ipoh, Malaysia, Nalla Tan is better known for her ground-breaking work as a physician on sex education in schools and her advocacy work with women in Singapore. She has written two poetry collections, *Emerald Autumn and Other Poems* (1976) and *The Gift, and Other Poems* (1978). They were republished, along with new poems, in *The Collected Poems of Nalla Tan* in 1998. She also wrote prose, which met with greater success. Her short stories have been anthologised in *The Sun in Her Eyes and Singapore Short Stories Volume II*, and released as a collection as *Hearts and Crosses* (1989). Much of Tan's poems draw on her life experiences growing up in Ipoh, and living in Singapore and the causes she championed. The following extract, from "Coffee at Eleven", satires the world of kept mistresses.

Coffee at eleven
Singapore mean time.
Leisured women,
Chauffeur driven
With nothing better to do
Than to sip hot coffee
Replacing the 'mems'
Of not so long ago

Who's being kept?
What, a second establishment!
With Woman's Charter!!

(Lines 1–8, 30–32;
The Gift and Other Poems, pp. 34–35)



Nalla Tan wore many hats – doctor, academic, writer. She advocated a diverse range of issues from health education to women's rights. Courtesy of Tan Ying Hsien.



Rosaly Puthucheary has been writing poetry since 1952. She obtained her doctorate in English Literature at the National University of Singapore. Courtesy of Rosaly Puthucheary.

Rosaly Puthucheary, sister of former left-wing politician James Puthucheary and Malaysian poet Susie Puthucheary, was born in Johor Bahru. She came to Singapore in 1974 and is now a retired teacher. To date, she has published six volumes of poetry *Pillow Your Dreams* (1978); *The Fragmented Ego* (1978); *Dance on His Doorstep* (1992); *Mirrored Images* (2008); *Footfalls in the Rain* (2008); *My Burning Hill* (2012); and two novels *The Tesselated Path* (2009) and *In the Wake of Terror* (2012). Her poems from the 1970s are short introspective pieces that dwell on the subject of romantic love and self-discovery. Poems, such as "A Door-Mat", hint at her feminist sentiments.

I will not be your door-mat
a piece of convenience
waiting at the door,
to dust the ash of your desire
a rug to throw your weariness
crushing the rush of my fibre
with your heavy indifference.

(Lines 1–7; *Pillow Your Dreams*, p. 1)



ANGELINE YAP (1959–)

Angeline Yap is the youngest poet featured in this article. She began writing as a child and contributed many poems during the 1970s and 1980s to periodicals such as *Saya*, *Focus* and *Singa*. Nurtured by the late Marie Bong who taught her to write not with her head but her heart, Yap won many prizes in writing competitions organised by the Ministry of Culture, NUS Literary Society and the National Book Development Council. Marie Bong was the former headmistress of CHIJ Katong and long-time editor of the student literary magazine *Saya*. Yap's poems were republished in 1986 under the title *Collected Poems*, and have appeared in contemporary anthologies such as *The Poetry of Singapore* (1985) and *Journeys: Words, Home and Nation* (1995). Yap is also a mentor with the National Arts Council's Mentor Access Project and released her second book of poems *Closing My Eyes to Listen* in 2011. Her latest outing sees a shift in direction towards spiritual contemplation, much like Lee Tzu Pheng's more recent works. The following poem written in "almost colloquial"¹¹ language is the first of two poems titled "Song of a Singaporean".

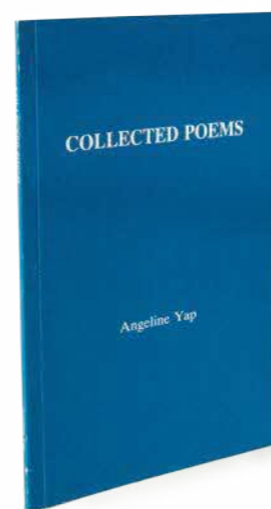
Yap's poem, "Colours", was also featured in the exhibition "Calligraphy in Collaboration with Poets and Artists" with American calligrapher, Thomas Ingmire, in 2013.

In Modern English
(Song of a Singaporean) (1975)

(i)
Are you mad with me
'Cos I'm not hooked
On Culture
Spelt with capital 'C',
'Cos I don't dig ballet,
Don't talk Chopin,
Beethoven or Bizet,
'Cos my spirit answers
To the call of the Chinese flute
And it dances
To the rhythm of the Malay beat,
'Cos my culture starts with 'c',
Not capital,
Not spoken with uplift of nose or brows,
Can you be mad with me?

(Lines 1–15; *Collected Poems*, p.10) ♦

These books are a sampling of Rosaly Puthucheary's poetry. She has also written two novels to date. All rights reserved, National Library Board Singapore, 2014.



Collected Poems by Angeline Yap was published in 1986. All rights reserved, National Library Board Singapore, 2014.

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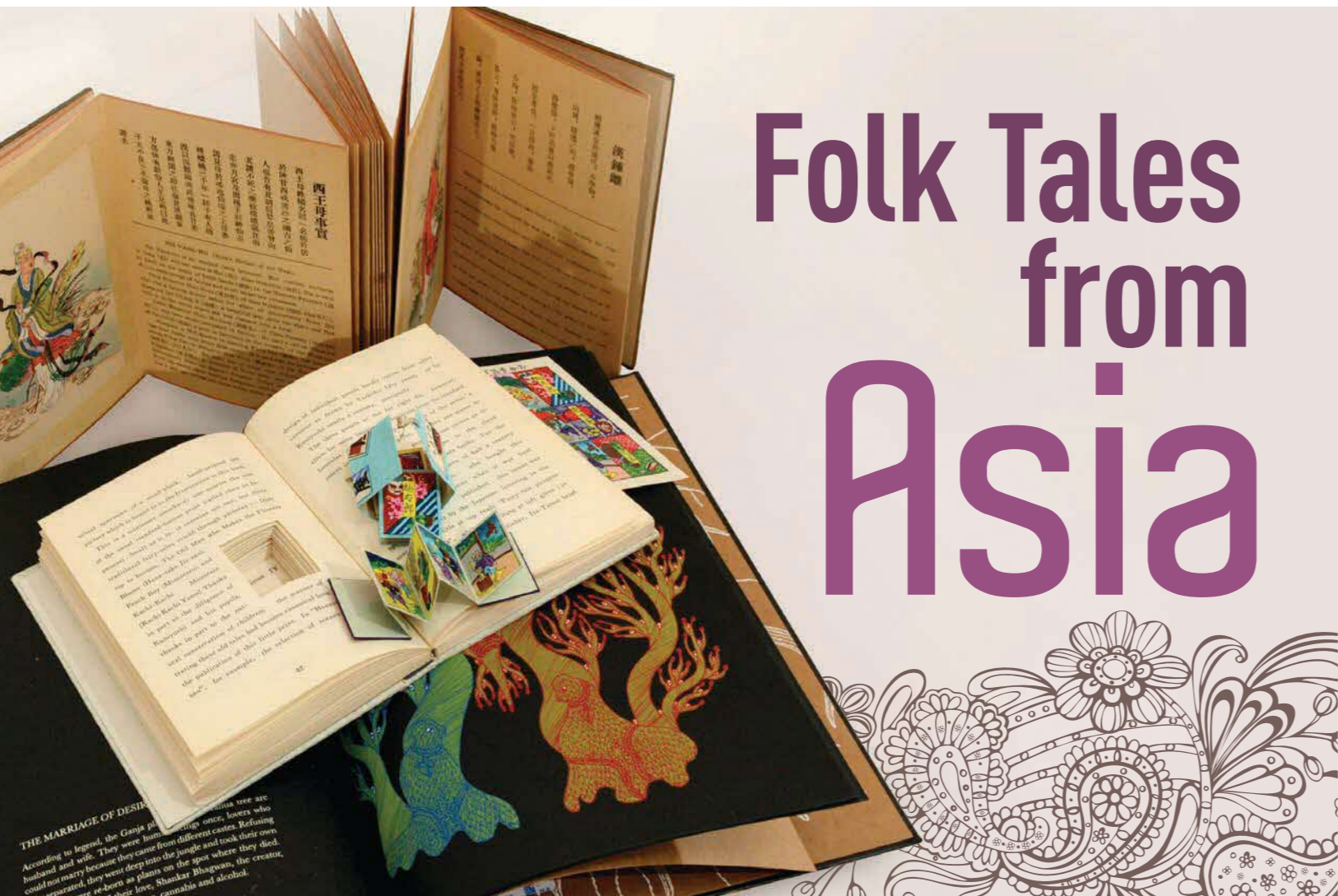
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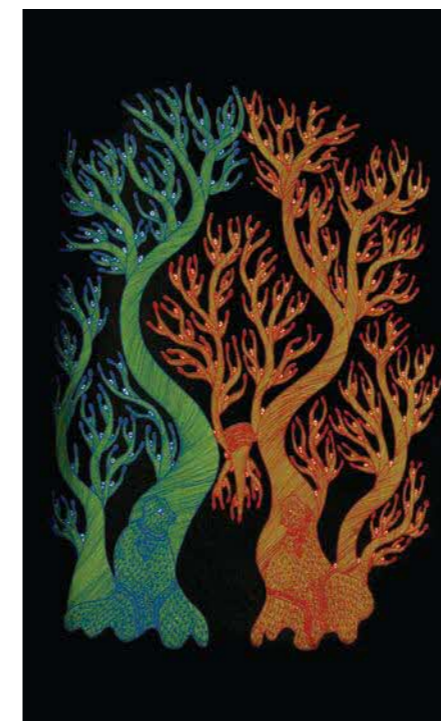
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Folk Tales from Asia



(Top) A peek into a page of *The Night Life of Trees*. One Gond legend featured is that of the Ganja plant and the Mahua tree. Believed to be humans before they were turned into trees, they were lovers who could not marry because they belonged to different castes. Refusing to be separated, the couple took their lives somewhere deep in the forest and were reborn as plants on the spot where they died.

INDIAN HANDMADE BOOKS

Throughout history, every culture has made books, or the equivalent of what passes for books, with whatever materials available at hand. Some communities would inscribe letters or symbols in clay that was then baked into a variety of shapes; others would create writing material crafted from materials such as plants and animal hides.

Over the last century, industrial production has steadily replaced traditional handmade means of book making. What is interesting, however, is that while modern technology and the invention of the printing press have made it possible to produce books more efficiently and in large quantities, there are places in the world where books are still being made by hand, using natural resources and time-honoured techniques passed down from one generation to another.

In parts of India, there is a strong tradition of products made by traditional crafts people using simple, indigenous tools. The range of Indian art and handicrafts is as rich and varied as the people who live in the subcontinent. Despite the march of time, the unique craft of handmade books is still very much alive in India today. *The Night Life of Trees*, *In the Dark* and *The Very Hungry Lion* are some examples of handmade books from India, using paper made from a mixture of cotton cloth remnants, tree bark, rice husks or grass.

The Night Life of Trees, published in 2012, is a handmade book that reflects the art of three Gond (a Dravidian people who live in central India) artists: Ram Singh Urveti, Bhajju Shyam and Durga Bai.

Painstakingly silk screened by hand, each spread showcases an intricate drawing of a sacred tree along with an explanation of its significance to the community. Each image is a tribute to the Gond community's animist belief in trees, giving readers an insight into the spirituality of the Gond people, and their perception of nature and the cosmos.

About 100 pulls of the screen are required to print each copy of the 32-page book. A print run of 2,000 copies would require about 200,000 pulls of the screen by hand, an indication of the immense time and effort to print these books. In addition, the books are hand-bound, a process that involves the punching of holes with a mallet and nail and hand-stitching the pages together.



(Top) Every copy of *The Night Life of Trees* is numbered by hand. This particular book is the 546th copy out of 2,000.

Another example of a handmade book is *Princess Meera*. Published in 1963, this is one of the most treasured possessions in the Asian Children's Literature collection. It is handwritten and bound by the author herself. Author Leela Row Dayal used line drawings to recount the story of Meerabai, a Hindu princess and mystical singer of sacred songs, based on Pandita Kshama Rao's Sanskrit poem (the Sanskrit verses are included in their original form in the book). In the book, Princess Meerabai – who is known for her devotion to Lord Krishna – is born in the city of Khurkhi and hails from a noble *kshatriya*, or warrior family.



(Top) *In the Dark* is a traditional Sufi tale of wisdom. This book is calligraphed and screen-printed on handmade paper.



(Top) The copy of *Princess Meera* found in the ACL collection. Published in 1963, only 10 copies of the book are available in the world.

Lynn Chua is a Senior Librarian with the National Library Board (NLB). She was in charge of developing the Asian Children's Literature collection at the Woodlands Regional Library in 2012, and making the collection available to a range of users such as researchers, teachers, parents and students. She has also initiated programmes and led librarians in curating exhibitions that cultivated interest in reading and appreciation of Asian culture and heritage.

The Asian Children's Literature collection at Woodlands Regional Library has some of the oldest and rarest children's books from Asia. Lynn Chua highlights these treasures.

Asia is the world's largest continent in terms of population and area. With 49 countries spanning from China to Indonesia from north to south and Syria to Japan from east to west and containing over 60 percent of the world's population, the Asian continent is home to a diverse variety of cultures with rich traditions and multi-layered histories.

Literature and art are the most common forms of cultural expression, and Asia, not surprisingly, is the birthplace of innumerable forms of folklore, mythologies and folk art. The National Library Board's Asian Children's Literature (ACL) collection

features notable works of literature from the region, with many of its books featuring handmade elements and intricate artwork.

Carefully accumulated over time, the 23,000-volume ACL collection is housed at the Woodlands Regional Library. The collection of extremely rare books, some of which were produced in limited copies, offers a gateway into Asia's rich cultures and its untold treasures. The collection is too large and disparate to document in a single article, so highlighted here are selected gems from India, Japan and China. It is hoped that these books will expose children to other cultures, piquing their curiosity and firing their imaginations.

(Top) A selection of works found in the Asian Children's Literature (ACL) collection at the Woodlands Regional Library. The 23,000-volume collection includes rare books that date back to the early 1900s.



JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINTS

Illustrations of Japanese literature typically feature woodblock colour-printing called *ukiyo-e*, one of the most famous traditional Japanese art forms.

The beauty of woodblock prints can be seen in *Otogi-Banashi*, a bilingual title packaged as an old-style toybook, which combines concepts of learning with play and serves as educational toys for children as well. Relatively few specimens in good condition exist today as, in many cases, these toybooks were literally read to pieces.¹

The craft of toybooks were originally created as playthings for Japanese children. Three Japanese folktales are featured in this volume: *The Old Man Who Makes the Flowers Bloom*, *Momotaro and Kachi-Kachi Mountain*. The binding and outer slipcover for this particular volume is made of *chiyogami*, a traditional Japanese paper characterised by its hand-stencilled and block-printed patterns.

For more recent works featuring woodblock prints, award-winning artist

(Top) The uniqueness of *Otogi-Banashi* lies in its accompanying miniature books and the book-within-a-book format. The miniature books contain only illustrations. The bigger book provides captions to the miniature books and an introductory essay to the history of toy-books and woodblock prints.

Keizaburo Tejima comes to mind. Born in 1935, he was one of the few Japanese artists working with the woodblock technique used in children's books in the 1980s. His books were published in 1986 in North America where he gained recognition as a prominent author and illustrator. *Owl Lake* and *Fox's Dream* were on the American Library Association (ALA)'s list of Children's Notable Books, and the *New York Times* listed *Fox's Dream* as one of 1987's 10 best illustrated books. His books are still popular today.

(Left) *Otogi-Banashi*. This specimen of an uncut single-sheet print found in *Otogi-Banashi* includes the heading "Fairy tale pictures for a toy book", with brief instructions in the left margin on how to turn the pictures into miniature books. The illustrations here and in the three miniature books contained in this single volume were printed by hand using the original wood blocks from the publisher's own collection.



(Left) The woodblocks used to print the *omocha-e* (toy pictures) in *Otogi-Banashi* were cut during the Taisho period (1912–1926). By a fortunate shift in location, the woodblocks escaped the bombing that destroyed most of Tokyo during World War II. Just before the war, the well-known printing house of Ise-tatsu was moved from Kanda to the historic area known as Yanaka. This was one of the few areas of Tokyo that escaped the bombings. As Hirose Tatsuguro remarks, it was a stroke of luck that the woodblocks of one of the last publishers of traditional children's books and *omocha-e* survived. The war saw the loss of private collections of *omocha-e* owned by children. As few museums or libraries had thought of collecting these toy-books, their loss was irreparable.

(Left) Often featured in flight with his expansive wings spanning entire two-page spreads, Father Owl's magnificence is undeniable. As Father Owl swoops down on his unsuspecting prey, the scene is sharply framed by the angled white space at the bottom of the spread, creating an optical illusion by emphasising the exhilaration and immediacy of the catch. Dramatic woodcut illustrations and the clever use of diagonal lines in *Owl Lake* bring alive the story of an owl and its family's search for food.

(Left) Three of Keizaburo Tejima's books from the Asian Children's Literature collection – *Owl Lake*, *Woodpecker Forest* and *Fox's Dream*. One of Tejima's purposes was to transport the reader vicariously to observe the wildlife of Hokkaido, his birthplace, and to showcase the island's natural beauty through his works. He used a tinted woodblock technique which he sometimes supplemented with brush-on paint. This traditional form allows for a good deal of texture in solid blocks of colour as well as very strong, bold lines.



(Top) *Pang Tao (Flat Peaches): Eight Fairies Festival*. The accordion book resembles a scroll when not folded. The transformation from Chinese scroll to accordion can be made by folding the scroll to form separate folios. Unlike the scroll books, which are awkward to unroll whenever one needs to examine a particular section of text, the accordion format makes it easier for the reader to sift through the text.

CHINA, BOOKBINDING AND PAPERCUTS

No one would dispute the importance of books and the written word in China. Few cultures in the world have enjoyed such a long and chequered tradition of literary production. Different kinds of Chinese bookbinding have been documented throughout history, many of them unique to China, including stitched binding, accordion binding and Chinese *pothi* binding.

Accordion bookbinding is where the book is bound only to the front and back case boards with one long sheet between them, folded to demarcate pages. Accordion books were traditionally used as a vehicle for Buddhist sutras. For this reason, it was named “*jingzhe zhuang*,” which means “folded sutra binding”. By the late

Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), the accordion format of books had been widely adopted by Buddhists in China. Accordion bookbinding was said to have evolved from Chinese scrolls.²

Pang Tao (Flat Peaches): Eight Fairies Festival (1900–1950) is one of the few titles in the ACL collection that is bound in an accordion format. *Pang Tao* is a Chinese folktale that portrays these legendary characters: Hsi Wang-Mu, renowned for her famously sweet and delicious *pang tao* (peaches), and the legendary Eight Immortals of Chinese mythology. This bilingual book (English and Chinese) tells of the origins of the immortals and how they embarked on their journeys towards deity-hood.

(Left) The eight hand-coloured plates of the legendary immortals framed in silk brocades in *Pang Tao (Flat Peaches): Eight Fairies Festival* breathe life into the characters and story.



The traditional style of papercutting is also typical of Chinese culture. The art of cutting paper designs in China developed during the Han and Wei periods before iron tools and paper were even invented. Paper-cutting is a technique of cutting an image out of paper. The final image is formed by the contrast of the solid parts that remain and the negative spaces that have been cut out. Legend has it that Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (156–87 BC) missed Lady Li, his favourite concubine who had died so much that he had a figure of her carved in hemp paper to summon her spirit back. This was perhaps the earliest mention of a papercut.³

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the art of papercutting reached its peak. The technique was applied for embellishing folk lanterns, fans and embroidered fabrics. Today, papercutting remains a very popular folk art, a distinctive feature of Chinese culture and is commonly used for decorations. Papercutting is also used to illustrate

Chinese literature. In *Six Chinese Brothers*, published in 1979, the author Cheng Houtien brings the ancient tale to life with red and black papercut illustrations using the scissor cutting technique.

In Chinese literature, papercut illustrations are used to depict famous scenes from popular legends that emphasise moral lessons and celebrate epic characters, providing a visual means to introduce Chinese art and culture to children during storytelling. As papercut illustrations combine folktales with art, they act as visual reminders of the beliefs and values of a people.

The books featured in this article offer just a tiny sampling of the treasures available in the Asian Children’s Literature collection. The stories contained within these books, when shared with our young generation, will help them understand their own ancestral cultures, traditions and values as well as that of the larger Asian world we live in. ♦



(Top) An ancient Chinese tale of six brothers, each with a special trait, *Six Chinese Brothers* is popular legend that has been written and told in many variations – in some versions, there are 10 brothers instead of six.

Notes

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SURATMAN MARKASAN: MALAY LITERATURE AND SOCIAL MEMORY

Azhar Ibrahim examines how the illustrious Malay writer Suratman Markasan uses literature as a means to propagate ideas and mark signposts in our social memory.



Dr Azhar Ibrahim is a Visiting Fellow at the Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore. He teaches classical and modern Malay-Indonesian literature.

Suratman Markasan is considered as one of Singapore's literary pioneers. *Image courtesy of Tribute.sg, an initiative by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.*

And so everyone made the assumption that the news had been barred from publication, because it was feared that such news would have a negative impact on the development of the minds of the younger generation. The truth is, there are men of all natures. So there was yet another assumption that the reporting of such news had been prevented because it would have a negative impact on the development of the nation and its people, or more specifically, on the formation of mainstream thoughts and minds.”

Suratman Markasan, *Penghulu* (2012: 243)

Suratman Markasan was born in 1930 in Pasir Panjang, Singapore. After completing his studies at Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) in Perak (Malaysia) in 1950, he joined the teaching service and in 1968 enrolled in Nanyang University, graduating three years later with a degree in Malay and Indonesian Studies. He was appointed as Assistant Director for Malay and Tamil studies at the Ministry of Education and following that, lectured at the Institute of Education until 1995. His literary career spans from the early 1950s right up to the present. In 1989, Suratman received the SEA Write Award from the Thai monarch¹ and in 2010, was awarded Singapore's prestigious Cultural Medallion for Literary Arts.

Suratman is a respected figure in modern Malay literary history. He is a Singapore writer through and through, exemplified in many of his works, both verse and prose. His literary repertoire encompasses three main areas: social critiques, with morality and ethics as the main criteria for evaluating ideas, values and practices; the observation of the social, cultural and political changes that have impacted Malay society; and the clamour for religious reforms and the return to religion in the midst of vast changes taking place in modern society. To Suratman, religion and ethics are essential tools to address the dehumanisation of thought and practices in society.

Suratman wrote his first poem “Hati Yang Kosong” (“An Empty Heart”) in 1954, recounting his pursuit of finding meaning in life. His collection of poems, recently compiled into a single volume², portrays the vista of his poetic concerns, talent and commitment. His concerns are primarily

social ones, in line with his background as an educator. He believes in using the literary medium to raise awareness of issues, or at least to document his perspectives and sentiments on matters that he has witnessed or experienced. But Suratman's poetic repertoire is not limited to social issues; he has written a fair number of poems on the subject of love, in particular, the ones he wrote for his late wife, Saerah Taris.³ Suratman has also written novels,⁴ short stories, poems, essays, and literary essays as well as compiled two anthologies of short stories and poems of selected Singapore writers.⁵

DEFINING SOCIAL MEMORY

By social memory, we mean the act and will of documenting the cultural experiences that a community has undergone, especially where changing political, social and economic contexts have posed serious challenges to such memory. It is not too far fetched to posit that a country's literary and cultural intelligentsia are the guardians of social memory.⁶ Literature is a medium that records, articulates and reimagines social memory; thus, literary works become important sources that document aspects of our social and historical lives. This is especially significant when a community's historical experiences and voices are marginalised and not captured in the dominant, mainstream historical narratives of the country.

Thus, Malay literary works such as Suratman's are important sources that we can draw upon as social memory, albeit through literary imagination. In this regard, Suratman's contributions to the literary scene cannot be underestimated. His works are set against a primarily Singapore

background, with characters and themes that local readers can relate to. The themes in turn reflect Suratman's response to the social, political, economic and cultural norms of both society and nation.

THE LOCAL LITERARY LANDSCAPE

Suratman wrote in the context of a hegemonic social and cultural discourse where critical and dissenting sentiments were deemed as chauvinistic, subversive or sometimes even extremist. This created an environment where the general public became adverse to critical or political works and where even writers themselves would ironically impose self-censorship in order to avoid direct conflict with those in power. However, it is through literature that dissenting ideas can be articulated via literary allegories and symbolism. Thus, oblique criticisms could be made without direct confrontation with the powers that be.

However, oftentimes the intended meaning of the writer might be lost on his audience, particularly one that might be politically apathetic due to an underdeveloped socio-cultural literacy. In general our readings of literature are rarely critical, in search of aesthetic pleasure rather than confronting the politics of literature. Also, the reading public and literary studies in our education system are very much divorced from the idea of the link between literature and society. With formalistic reading and aesthetic criticism dominating literary scholarship, our understanding of the role of ideas in literature is further inhibited.

LITERARY IDEAL AND ASPIRATION

Suratman writes not for recognition or revenue. His primary purpose is to propagate ideas for the reading public to consider. His dedication in the Malay literary world is affirmed by his conviction that literature has the role of developing men and women who become conscious, through the reflection and appreciation of beauty and truth, to challenge the accepted norms, or to deliberate on issues that are deemed as taboo. As a literary figure who has been present during the major milestones of Singapore's literary history, Suratman is someone who sees and has seen the development of Singapore's literary landscape.

As a national literary pioneer, his body of work, built over the years, tracks the maturing of his thoughts, the improvement of his writing craft and style, and the themes he explores. Overall Suratman is a modernist writer, writing with a reformist bent, uniquely positioned to speak for

his community in a modern multicultural society. Suratman's works advocate reform, calling for progress and change, pointing clearly at those who are ambivalent to the communities' predicaments. As a language teacher, Suratman is critical that vernacular languages, namely, Malay, Tamil and Mandarin are being sidelined in favour of English. He also examines issues such as the elite's abandonment of responsibility towards ensuring the welfare and dignity of his community.

LITERARY ENGAGEMENT

Suratman is a dedicated commentator of the current social climate. As a keen observer of ordinary experiences, Suratman's works document the social life of his community, especially the challenges it faces in an urban setting. But this does not make him any less a literary craftsman. He does not subscribe to any particular philosophy, nor does he champion a specific agenda. His mastery lies in crafting simple short stories that are easily understood. His collections of poems are loaded with social criticisms as well as fragments of his personal experiences.

In general, his works record the challenges and turbulence of urban life. He embraces the view that literature is a platform for social and cultural enlightenment, aimed at guiding his community in the transition from traditional to modern society. Suratman is also a narrator of past experiences, or the recent past to be more precise. This is where several of his works have encapsulated the theme of social memory. This idea can be classified into three main themes.

His literary works, firstly, present social commentaries on the Malay community, criticising what he feels to be undesirable actions or ideas. His creative works, both in prose and verse, are complemented by his essays on culture, religion and language. Secondly, Suratman presents himself as a family man, both as father and husband. Thirdly, his works affirm his spiritual and religious convictions.

Suratman often writes about themes commonly expressed by the Singapore Malay community. He attempts to engage his readers to think about the issues raised, encouraging them to contemplate their existential and social conditions. These issues include parental neglect, spiritual emptiness, cultural alienation, language deprivation, the plight of the poor, the leadership crisis in the Malay community and the mismanagement of mosques.⁷

His poetry considers several aspects of social memory such as his memory of physical spaces that used to be part of his life, and which have now disappeared. This is captured in his poem on his alma mater, Sultan Idris Training College. One recurring reference in his poems is Tun Seri Lanang Secondary School, a Malay-medium school whose establishment was a seen as a triumph for Malay education in Singapore. When the school was formed in 1963, Suratman described the joy he felt: "apparently Seri Lanang was born beside Kallang River/ all the Malays who were supportive were joyous" (*ternyata lahir Seri Lanang di tepi Sungai Kallang/ segala Melayu yang suka menatang gem-bira*).⁸ But by 1989, these Malay-medium schools were closed as enrolment fell drastically, with Malay families preferring

to send their children to English-medium schools instead. Suratman lamented:

negara Seri Lanang kian pudar
di mata Mat Layu / pelajar tinggal
sedikit guru menjadi buntu / di sana
sini orang bercakap Inggeris tentu
/ biar dianggap punya pelajaran
tinggi / atau di kedai kopi yang tak
memerlu degree / Melayu sudah
lesap Inggeris belum lengkap / pada
detik yang bernama 1987 / Tun Seri
Lanang mengikuti jejak Sang Nila
Utama / tak terduga tenggelam di
Sungai Sejarahnya.⁹

the state of Seri Lanang was fading in
the eyes of Mat Layu / students were
getting fewer, teachers were at their
wits' end / hither and thither people
spoke English for certain / in order
to be deemed as highly educated /
even in coffee shops that didn't need
a degree / Malay was gone, English
was yet to take over completely /
in the year called 1987 / Tun Seri
Lanang followed the footsteps of
Sang Nila Utama / unexpectedly sank
in Historical River.

Again in another poem, "Masih Adakah Melayu di Sini?" ("Will Malays Still be Around?")

Nila Utama dan Seri Lanang sudah
tenggelam / satu di bidadari satu
di Sungai Kallang / Swiss Cottage
sudah hilang Cottagenya / Pasir
Panjang Monk's Hill dan Siglap /
sudah terkubur tanpa nisannya /
anak dan cucu mereka sudah hilang
jati dirinya / itulah nasib peribumi
Melayu namanya¹⁰

Nila Utama and Seri Lanang are
sunken / one in Bidadari, another
at Kallang River / Swiss Cottage
has lost its Cottage / Pasir Panjang,
Monk's Hill and Siglap / are now
buried without a tombstone / their
children and grandchildren have lost
their identity / that's the fate of the
Malay natives

Economic development in Singapore in the 1960s and 70s led to the relocation of Malays from their traditional community spaces. Pictured here are Malays living on one of the southern islands on public assistance welfare in 1961. MITA collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Suratman laments the loss of the past not so much because he was romanticising it, but because he felt that in keeping pace with changing times, the way in which progress and development affected people on the ground was overlooked. Only a perceptive poet like Suratman could capture the sentiments of those affected by these changes, giving their struggles a voice and form:

Laut tempatku menangkap ikan /
bukit tempatku mencari rambutan /
sudah menghitun dilanda batu bata,
/ Pak Lasim tak bisa lagi menjadi
penghulu / pulaunya sudah dicabut
dari peta kepalanya / anak buah
sudah terdampar / di batu-bata dan
pasir-masir hangat.¹¹

The sea where I caught fishes / the
hill where I looked for rambutans /
have turned into a jungle swarmed
by bricks, / Pak Lasim can no longer
be a headman / his island has been
uprooted from his mind / his kinsmen
have been marooned / on hot bricks
and sand

These lines refer to the Southern islanders who were forced to resettle on mainland Singapore. Suratman empathised with their plight, as their loss was also his:

Aku kehilangan lautku / aku kehilan-
gan bukitku / aku kehilangan diriku.¹²

I have lost my sea / I have lost my hill
/ I have lost my self.

The close knit village community is gone. Suratman remembers the small village and all its residents; he knows them personally without needing to differentiate between a Malay and Chinese person. This is illustrated in "Dalam Perjalanan Masa," ("With the Passage of Time"):

Ketika aku masih kecil / banyak yang
aku tahu / kerana duniaku sesempit
kampungku / penduduknya kuhafal
dalam kepala / aku kenal mereka
bukan kenal Cina / daun-daun gugur
bisa tertangkap mata¹³

As a little child / I knew a lot / as my
world was as narrow as my village /
the villagers were entrenched in my
mind / I knew them all, not casually?
/ falling leaves can be caught by
the eyes

Suratman is especially sensitive to junctures in Singapore's history where social memory is both affirmed and denied. In "Balada Seorang Lelaki Di Depan Patung

Raffles" ("The Ballad of a Man Before the Statue of Raffles") Suratman describes a mad man who posed questions before the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles, founder of modern Singapore. The insane man who railed at the statue of Raffles can be seen as the representative of the indigenous man who became a victim of colonialism. In another poem, Suratman challenges the dominant historical narrative, reminding the reader that the victims of colonialism are his own people:

Telah kukatakan seribu kali / kau
menipu datukku hidup mati / kau
merampas hartanya pupus rakus
/ kau bagikan kepada kawan lawan
/ kau dengar Raffles? Kau dengar?
/ seharusnya kau kubawa ke
muka pengadilan.¹⁴

I've said it a thousand times / you
deceived my grandparents totally
/ you seized their properties till it's
gone, greedily / you gave it away to
your friends, enemies / do you hear,
Raffles? Do you hear? / I should have
brought you to face justice

The questioning of history by this mad man reminds us of the weapons of the weak in their confrontation with the dominant power. The fight may be futile, but the sentiment reflects the angst of humiliation and the struggle to resist it. The weak may have no power to challenge authority, except with words of affirmation of their dignity and rights. Thus the mad man's curse against the two colonial figures (Raffles and William Farquhar), is the objection to history by the very people who have been denied in history.

Dosamu tujuh turunan kusumpah
terus / kau membawa Faquhar
dan Lord Minto / siasatmu halus.
Membuka pintu kotaku / pedagang
buruh pemimpin menambah
kantong / membangun Temasek
menjadi Singapura / masuk sama
penipu perompak pembunuh / aku
sekarang tinggal tulang dan gigi
cuma / kusumpah tujuh turunanmu
tanpa tangguh!¹⁵

Your sins for seven generations
I put a curse on / you brought with
you Farquhar and Lord Minto / your
intelligence was subtle. By opening
my city doors / traders, labourers,
leaders filled up their pockets / they
developed Temasik into Singapore
/ swindlers, robbers, murderers all
entered too / I'm now left with only
bones and teeth / I curse you for
seven generations now!

Suratman again challenges the dominant historical narrative in another poem:

di sekolah aku diajar ilmu sejarah /
Raffles menemui Singapura / raja
mendapat kekayaan menjadi besar
empayarnya / sultan mendapat
wang menjadi gemuk tubuhnya
/ pendatang bertambah hidupku
tak berubah¹⁶

At school, I was taught history /
Raffles founded Singapore / the king
gained riches, his empire expanded
/ the sultan received money, his
body became plump / immigrants
increased, my life remained
the same

In a country where modernisation and progress is celebrated, we forget that there are some things that are lost in the process of attaining these goals. The cultural life of the people is one realm where this loss is most significantly felt:

Aku berjalan di pesisir Geylang
/ terpekik-pukau raja kuih / tak
kutemui kuih Melayu / yang
melambak biskut dan cookie / aku
terdorong ke Kampung Melayu /
tapi ibu dan anak tak berbahasa
Melayu / aku mencari baju kurung
teluk belanga / yang kutemui cekak
musang berkancing cina¹⁷

I walked along the sidewalk in
Geylang / the king of *kuih* was
hollering / I didn't find Malay *kuih* / but
plenty of biscuits and cookies / I was
prompted to go to the Malay Village
/ yet, a mother and her child there
didn't speak Malay / I was looking for
a *teluk belanga baju kurung* / what
I found was *cekak musang baju* with
Chinese buttons

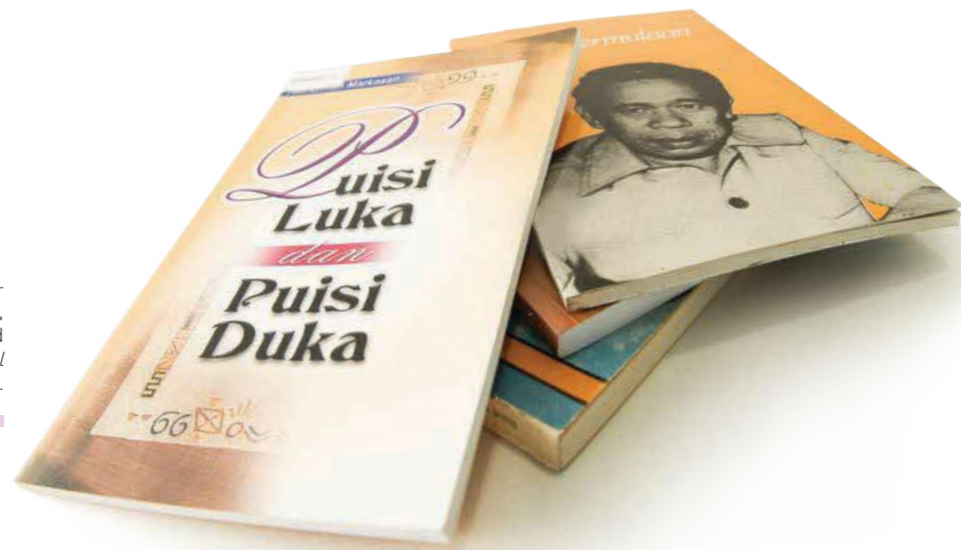
The phenomenon of levelling down of cultural standards and excellence in our modern fast-paced society is a state of affairs that Suratman bemoans. Cultural sensibilities are lost alongside the fading memories of the past. With cultural amnesia comes historical amnesia. The younger generation, Suratman notes, has lost its reverence for Malay historical figures:

pahlawan Nila Utama kurang
disanjung pendekar Melayu / penulis
Seri Lanang berdiri termangu
menunggu budak Melayu¹⁸

the warrior Nila Utama was hardly
celebrated by Malay fighters / the
writer Seri Lanang stood puzzled
waiting for Malay students

To build a future, moulding it to our needs and character requires a sense of place and being.

Suratman has produced a large body of work, with themes that cover issues such as race and nationhood. All rights reserved, National Library Board Singapore, 2014.



Suratman, however, clearly remembers the Malay historical figure whose actions precipitated the plight of his people:

dan lupa daratan Sultan Husin Syah
juga / ditambah tipu muslihat Raffles
Farquhar / tergadai sudah Singapura
ke tangan Inggeris¹⁹

and Sultan Husin Syah's insensible of
his place / plus the ruses of Raffles
and Farquhar / Singapura was
pawned into the hands of the British

The decisions of past Malay leadership are responsible for the fate of Malays today. But Suratman is equally vehement against the present Malay leadership, particularly their ambivalence towards and negligence in promoting the Malay language:

di sini sana orang bercakap Inggeris
tentu / baik di rapat MUIS atau
MENDAKI maju / biar pun di gerai
Geylang si Mat Layu yang baru²⁰

hither and thither people spoke
English for certain / either in MUIS
or MENDAKI meetings they went on
/ even at the new stall of Mat Layu
in Geylang

Here, Suratman, who is passionate about the Malay language, laments the diminishing presence of the once dominant language in Singapore. The post-separation era saw the language disappear from the mainstream, compounded by the closure of Malay schools:

Aku tak punya apa lagi / Seri
Lanang dan Nila Utama tinggal
nama / saudara peribumi menolak
bahasa / mengejar Inggeris lambang
kemajuan.²¹

I no longer have anything / Sri
Lanang and Nila Utama remain
names / my native siblings have
rejected the Malay language / they
are pursuing English as a symbol
of progress

Suratman's works, especially his poems, capture a variety of memories that he encountered and perceived as well as imagined. His personal recollections of the past are in themselves a rich of source of the lives that are no longer part of our collective memory. In his poem, "70 Tahun Usiaku" ("The Seventeenth Year of My Life"), he charts each decade of his life, noting his experiences in witnessing unfolding history.

He starts his first decade with his basic education and the Japanese inter-

regnum. His second decade marked his life-changing stint at the famous Sultan Idris Training College in Malaysia, a hotbed of Malay nationalism where Malay teachers throughout Malaya, Borneo and Singapore were trained; his third decade saw his active involvement in ASAS '50 (The Singapore's Writers' Movement established in 1950) and the impending independence of Malaya; his fourth decade saw the push for Malay language as a medium of education; and his fifth decade saw the institutionalisation of two Malay-Muslim bodies in Singapore, namely MUIS and MENDAKI, to oversee the educational and religious welfare of the community.

By the time he turned 60, Suratman had witnessed several turbulent regional and international events. In his 70s, he became contemplative, reflecting on and searching for the meaning of life and his service to the Creator.

Today at the age of 83, Suratman is still writing and compiling his works to make them available to contemporary audiences. He continues to teach, and delivers seminars locally and regionally. His research on Malay literature reflects the breadth of his thought. While he is skilled at narrating short stories, he is no less excellent in crafting essays or literary history, projecting its trajectories and nuances over time.²² He has also edited Singapore-

Malay literary works for Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), putting Singapore-Malay works on the map of Malaysian, Bruneian and Indonesian literary scholarship.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARKING SOCIAL MEMORIES

Suratman has meticulously documented what he has experienced, expressing his perspectives, lamentations and even joy. He is very conscious of how history has impacted his people, namely their plight of displacement and neglect. He actively engages with the issues of his community and nation, convinced that writers are the "eyes of the society." Suratman is thus a poet of conscience, cognizant of societal issues, as well as the flag bearer of morality, defender of human dignity and preserver of group identity.

Singapore has experienced vast changes in a short period of time, with many of its common spaces, institutions and practices disappearing from the landscape; even our memories of yesteryear are fading. Herein lies the role of the writer who is seen as the conscience of his society and the purveyor of humanity. As a writer Suratman's work is firmly didactic, imparting a strong moral message; he is more concerned with the moral and intellectual presence of literature, not so much its ornaments or finesse.

The sense of loss that Suratman writes about is not just the loss that he experienced on a personal level, but one that can also be related to the loss of his community. His own loss makes him consistently relate his thoughts and sentiments. As evidenced by his voluminous legacy, he is writer, narrator and commentator of social memories that are dissipating in our midst. Indeed the stamina for remembrance is often circumscribed in an era that celebrates newness. We must keep in mind that our progress and development is rendered meaningless if we are bereft of appreciating the past. To build a future, moulding it to our needs and character requires a sense of place and being. Suratman's memory is a search inasmuch as it is a hope, but as a poet his scepticism warrants us to consider our destinies seriously:

Singapuraku / aku mengerti sekali
/ di sini tempatku / tapi aku tidak
tahu bila / aku akan menemui segala
kehilanganku?²³

My Singapore / I truly understand /
here is my home / yet I do not know
when / I will recover what I have lost. ♦

Notes

- Other awards include: Montblanc-NUC Centre for the Arts Literary Award (1997), Anugerah Pujangga from UPSI in 2003. Singapore Malay Language Council accorded to him the highest literary award of Tun Seri Lanang in 1999.
- Suratman Markasan, *Kembali ke Akar Melayu Kembali ke Akar Islam. Jilid 1, Kumpulan Puisi 1954–2011*. (Singapore: Darul Andalus, 2013)
- Siti Zainon Ismail, "Potret Isteri Yang Hilang" in Johar Buang (ed.) *70 Tahun Suratman Markasan*. (Singapore: Toko Buku Hj Hashim, 2001), pp. 322–333
- His two novels, *Penghulu yang Hilang Segala-galanya* (1998) has been translated into English (Penghulu, 2012) His first novel *Tak Ada Jalan Keluar* (1962) has been translated into English as *Conflict* (1980).
- Tiga Warna Bertemu Antologi Puisi Penulis-penulis Singapura* (1987) *Temasik Antologi Cerpen Penulis-penulis Singapura* (1987)
- Ngugi's reflection on this point is relevant in many developing societies: "Writers, artists, musicians, intellectuals, and workers in ideas are the keepers of memory of a community. What fate awaits a community when its keepers of memory have been subjected to the West's linguistics means of production and storage of memory... we have languages, but our keepers of memory feel that they cannot store knowledge, emotions, and intellectual in [their] languages." Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New*. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2009), p. 114
- Read Suratman Markasan, *Bangsa Melayu Singapura dalam Transformasi Budayanya*. (Singapore: Anuar Othman & Associates, 2005)
- Suratman Markasan, "Di Balik Bayang Tun Seri Lanang", *Suratman Markasan: Kembali Ke Akar Melayu Kembali Ke Akar Islam, Jilid 1, Kumpulan Puisi 1954–2011*, (Singapore: Darul Andalus, 2013), h. 412
- Ibid., h. 414
- Suratman Markasan, "Masih Adakah Melayu di Sini?", *Suratman Markasan: Kembali Ke Akar Melayu Kembali Ke Akar Islam, Jilid 1, Kumpulan Puisi 1954–2011*, (Singapore: Darul Andalus, 2013), h. 458
- Suratman Markasan, "Jalan Permulaan (Buat Suri, Lita & Taufiq) – The Journey Begins", *Suratman Markasan: Kembali Ke Akar Melayu Kembali Ke Akar Islam, Jilid 1, Kumpulan Puisi 1954–2011*, (Singapore: Darul Andalus, 2013), h. 10
- Ibid., h. 10
- Suratman Markasan, "Dalam Perjalanan Masa", *Suratman Markasan: Kembali Ke Akar Melayu Kembali Ke Akar Islam, Jilid 1, Kumpulan Puisi 1954–2011*, (Singapore: Darul Andalus, 2013), h. 257
- Suratman Markasan, "Balada Seorang Lelaki Di Depan Patung Raffles", *Suratman Markasan: Kembali Ke Akar Melayu Kembali Ke Akar Islam, Jilid 1, Kumpulan Puisi 1954–2011*, (Singapore: Darul Andalus, 2013), h. 45
- Ibid., h. 47
- Suratman Markasan, "Dalam Perjalanan Masa", h. 257
- Suratman Markasan, "Masih Adakah Melayu Di Sini?", h. 456
- Suratman Markasan, "Mencari Melayu Yang Melayu", *Suratman Markasan: Kembali Ke Akar Melayu Kembali Ke Akar Islam, Jilid 1, Kumpulan Puisi 1954–2011*, (Singapore: Darul Andalus, 2013), h. 454

¹⁹ Suratman Markasan, "Di Balik Bayang Tun Seri Lanang", h. 415

²⁰ Suratman Markasan, "Mencari Melayu Yang Melayu", h. 454

²¹ Suratman Markasan, "Cerita Peribumi Singapura", *Suratman Markasan: Kembali Ke Akar Melayu Kembali Ke Akar Islam, Jilid 1, Kumpulan Puisi 1954–2011*, (Singapore: Darul Andalus, 2013), h. 57

²² For instance read, "Suratman Markasan, "Kesusasteraan Melayu Singapura Dulu, Sekarang dan Masa Depan," dlm *Persidangan Penulis ASEAN*. (Kuala Lumpur: DBP, 1978), h. 299–324

²³ Suratman Markasan, "Jalan Permulaan (Buat Suri, Lita & Taufiq) – The Journey Begins", h. 12

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1980年代儿童小说中的

“新加坡童”

叶若诗为李光前参考图书馆之参考咨询馆员，专责中文艺术类馆藏。她毕业于北京大学中文系，后赴英国剑桥大学东方学系专攻中国现代文学，考获硕士学位。身为土生土长新加坡人的她，自小喜爱中华文学。

Jessie Yak is a Reference Librarian at the National Library. She manages and develops content for the library's Chinese Arts collection. She studied Chinese Language and Literature at Beijing University and the University of Cambridge.

The literary scene in post-war Singapore was flooded with newcomers in the Chinese creative writing scene. Among all the genres, children's literature, in particular, received special attention from the government, who encouraged writers to create works for children using Singapore as the backdrop. By the early 1980s, children's literature was a hot topic, discussed and debated at length in numerous articles in various Chinese newspapers. Given the attention it received, Jessie Yak conducted a study on Chinese children's literature published in the 1980s that adopted Singapore as the setting, with a particular focus on how local children were portrayed in these novels and short stories.

建国初期的新加坡，中文创作风气盛，文艺新秀不断涌现并积极发表作品，使文坛出现一片欣欣向荣、百花齐放的图景。其中，在政府领导人的呼吁、官方部门的推动下，²儿童文学在1970年代末开始引起社会关注，到了1980年代初更是被广泛讨论，报章上经常刊登有关儿童文学的议论文章。³1980年代伊始的第一天，《星洲日报》便刊登了“80年代的新加坡文艺”座谈会的记录，⁴作家周国灿（周燊）在会上提出，80年代应该是多注意儿童文学的创作的时候了，儿童文学的创作应该可以成为80年代文艺其中的一个特点。

有鉴于此，笔者选择了1980年代在新加坡出版，以本地生活为背景的儿童小说作为关注对象，尝试探讨在建国约二十年后，儿童小说里所呈现的“新加坡儿童”面貌。耐人寻味的是，以上世纪七、八十年代中文出版界的蓬勃，这类作品的数量竟然不多。1979年7月，《星洲日报》便刊登过一篇名为“谈我国儿童文学”的评论，里头提到

“我国的儿童文学虽然已经得到关注，但是还仅于开始阶段，距离全面发展与丰硕的成绩仍有段差距”，而且“就目前市面上书局所销售的各种儿童书刊来看，现今我国儿童阅读的作品，有很多是过去各国的作家的创作而遗留下来的，或者是来自香港、欧美各国等地的儿童书刊，……真正属于本国作家所创作的儿童文学，却是寥寥无几，屈指可数”。⁵与这篇文章相呼应的是，1982年胜利书局出版“小顽皮”小说系列时，广告中还打出了“第一套取材于本地的少年儿童读物”的宣传文字。⁶

尽管选择不多，笔者在阅览了大部分收藏于新加坡国家图书馆的这类儿童文学读物后，还是觅得一些符合探讨范围的作品，并对其内容进行了梳理。不论在哪个年代，儿童的生活范围总离不开家庭、学习、朋友，和玩乐，因此笔者也围绕这几个方面归纳出以下的特点。

生活环境

上世纪八十年代的新加坡，经济急速发展，在1981年就已与南韩、香港、台湾并称“亚洲四小龙”⁷这样的经济转变无可避免地影响了孩子们的生活，而细心敏感的作家们也把这些影响和改变一一捕捉到作品中。

一 组屋生活

从上世纪六十年代开始，新加坡政府就致力于建造组屋以解决人民的居住问题，到了八十年代，大部分的人口都住在以组屋为主的公共住房。⁸因此，与建国前的文学作品相比，一个明显的变化即大部分的故事主人翁都住在组屋里，或作品中对组屋生活有大量描写。



孩子们在前新加坡国家图书馆翻阅儿童图书，摄于上世纪八十年代。
MITA collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

在《我的世界快乐多》里，主人翁丽莲便住在组屋，她每天放学回家必做的事情便是到组屋底层的信箱集中处去查看有没有当海员的父亲寄回来的家书，然后带着弟弟海山搭电梯回家。作者巧妙地将信箱和电梯的特征与丽莲的动作与心情形成对比，突出了丽莲内心的忐忑不安与沉重焦灼：

丽莲的家居于高高的十二楼，所以分配给他们的信箱也在较高的地方。……她踮起脚跟，伸出食指……信箱里，黑洞洞的不见半抹信封的影子，丽莲万般失望，怏怏然的缩手，手指一移开，信箱的缝盖登时自动关上……丽莲沮丧的跨进电梯，门关闭了，电梯缓缓的上升，而她的心竟匆遽下降，下降——⁹

在《小顽皮学乖了》里，主人翁可欣与一班同学到一房式组屋区探访受伤的同学秀花，在家访的过程中，他们惊讶地发现：

- i. 有家长叫尿急的孩子在电梯里撒尿；
- ii. 组屋环境阴暗，为了减少开销，邻居的孩子待晚上走廊灯亮后，到走廊尽头温习功课；
- iii. 秀花家里的唯一“房间”是用布围出来的，夜里她的父母睡在“房间”里，两个弟弟睡在双层床的上层，奶奶和妹妹睡下层，她自己有时和奶奶、妹妹挤下层床，有时睡地板。

秀花挤迫拮据的家境给可欣一行人上了一堂“震撼教育”课，使他们更珍惜自己较为舒适的环境，也下定决心要更努力学习，因为他们都比秀花幸福得多。¹⁰

二 贫富之间

当国家经济正在转型时，像丽莲、秀花那样的低收入家庭固然依旧存在，但是也出现了一些买得起奢侈品，并且能够出国旅游的富裕阶层。而这些富裕家庭的消费行为，都给自家的孩子，和其他家庭的孩子，带来了不小的心理冲击。

在《小顽皮学乖了》里，年终考试结束后，学生都把家里的玩具带到学校和同学们一起玩。一群小学生之间的对话便反映了部分来自富裕家庭的儿童心态：

“噢，雅萍，怎么你又买了一个新的电子游戏机？” 洁晶问道。

“嗯，昨晚妈妈带我去‘shopping’我吵着她买给我的。” 班上的富家女雅萍道。

“你不是说上个月你爸爸刚买了一个一百七十多块的太空电子玩具吗？怎么现在又吵着妈妈买电子游戏机呢？” 小慧不解地问。

“哎呀！那个我已经玩腻了。”

“玩腻了？” 伟强奇怪地问道：

“那么如果这个玩腻了，你也要买多一个？”

“当然啦” 雅萍毫不在乎地道：“现在我家已经有四个电子游戏机了。”

“咩，四个！”

众人异口同声地喊了起来。¹¹

在《跳字手表》里，来自单亲家庭的优异生明光兴冲冲地赶到巴刹，准备告诉当菜贩的母亲，自己不但考到全班第一名，而且是全级第一名；他要母亲履行诺言，送他一只期盼已久的电子跳字手表。可是当他们喜孜孜地回到家中，母亲拿出表来时，却是一只泛着黄光的旧表，明光失望得掉头就走。

第二天举行毕业典礼的时候，明光看到同学里面有好几个人都换了新表，连最后一名的李名发也换了，他那个电子表不是刚买的吗？这些人真是浪费。李名发还说过几天他妈妈要带他到美国玩呢，耀成也说要去马来西亚。只有他，连个手表都没有，更不用说到哪里去玩了。他闷闷不乐地坐在礼堂里……¹²



胜利书局“蜗牛少年儿童读物”之一的《小顽皮学乖了》（“小顽皮”小说系列）。

与此同时，明光的母亲为了赚钱给他买电子表，学非法菜贩冒险把菜拿到路边卖，结果被警察抓了。明光跑回家想把那个旧表拿去典当，筹钱把母亲保释出来。看着那个旧表，明光为自己的虚荣心害苦了母亲而悔恨不已。幸好因母亲是初犯，警方只罚了她二十元，警告一番后，便把她释放了。

学习任务

新加坡于1965年8月9日宣布独立的二十天后，副总理杜进才在一个理工学院的毕业典礼上讲话时便提到，如今新加坡已是一个独立国家，本地的大专学府也需要随着重新定位其目标，确保其毕业生不但充分掌握专业领域内的学识，同时也具备受到海内外认可的素质与能力。¹³三个多月后，报章报道了政府正在加紧通过不同管道，例如理工学院和职业专科学校，为多种工业培训员工，以便各工业内备有一批随时能上阵的熟练员工。¹⁴政府对教育素质和技能培训的重视，再加上国家发展过程中各业界如电子业、¹⁵交通业¹⁶等对高学历、高技能人才的殷切需求，¹⁷遂造成

父母普遍对子女教育的要求偏高。除了课后补习外，各类课余活动如学习乐器、舞蹈、绘画、游泳等也是不少学生的日常生活内容。

于是，在文学作品中便经常看到因达不到父母的课业要求而承受巨大压力、或因忙于应付多个补习和活动而身心俱疲的儿童身影，例如在《可怜的小龙》¹⁸里的同名主人翁、“小顽皮”系列¹⁹里的爱玲、《漫游新加坡》²⁰里的小英、《妈妈，你还爱我吗？》²¹里的小坤、《我要100分》²²里的尊尼、《玲玲的星期天》²³里的同名主人翁等。

当然，作品中也有像“小顽皮”系列里的邦邦和燕萍那样能够自发温习功课，不用家教监督的优异生；或像《不能公开的礼物》里的自光，²⁴和《我的世界快乐多》里的丽莲那样因家境不佳而未请家教的学生，不过相对而言，他们还是属于较少被刻画的一群。有意思的是，作品中要求严格的父母一般都来自富裕家庭，而《不能公开的礼物》里却描绘了一个需要在家中车衣补贴家用，但依然紧张孩子学习成绩的母亲：

（自光）才放下电话，妈妈就从房里冲了出来，她的耳朵怎么那么灵？

“你没有抄什么？有功课还不快点去做！慢吞吞的，别忘了，你今年要参加分流考试呀！看你弟弟妹妹，人家一个二年级，一个一年级，都比你听话，做功课从来不用我叫，谁象你，他们两个都念下午班，没人打扰你，你还不能安心地去做你的功课，真没你的办法，如果不及格啊，你可别来见我！”……

“砰”的一声，自光把房门关上，妈妈却怔在门外。

这孩子，这么大了，一点也不谅解大人的苦心，越来越虚荣，越来越贪图享受，他什么时候才会明白事理？²⁵

情感表现

八十年代的新加坡尚未高度城市化与商业化，人们的思想感情中还带有不少源自“甘榜”生活的淳朴敦厚，而这样的思维也连带影响了孩子，因此在这个时期的文学作品中出现的儿童，其情感表现有时纯真得让人莞尔，有时又诚挚得令人动容。

在《小顽皮哭了》的第四章“小小的心意”²⁶里，主人翁可欣和一班同学为



胜利书局“蜗牛少年儿童读物”之一的《漫游新加坡》。

了该如何给老师们庆祝教师节而相持不下，有的提出买礼物给老师，有的建议请老师吃东西，有的又担心花费太大会被家长骂，吵个不休。最后班长邦邦提醒大家，级任林老师曾经说过“只有亲自做出来的东西才是最珍贵、最有意思的”，因此提议大家从家里带一些食物来请老师和同学们吃，并亲手制作礼物送给老师。大伙儿接受了邦邦的意见，并且互相帮忙收集和提供材料（火柴盒、巴士车票、颜色纸等），让彼此能够发挥创意和手艺，做出最漂亮的礼物。在可欣寄宿的宿舍里，其他寄宿生们也动脑筋帮助可欣解决制作过程中所碰到的问题。这一章并不长，但是内容却洋溢着温馨，作者细腻的文笔让读者能够透过文字感受到可欣与同学们对老师的敬爱和感恩，以及想做出“全世界最好的礼物”送给老师的心意。

在《我的世界快乐多》中，丽莲的母亲以售卖椰浆饭补贴家用，而为了让母亲多休息，就读小学六年级的丽莲，课余总是抢着拎起饭篮，到组屋区叫卖。同学雪华知道后，经常向她购买椰浆饭，每次买的都不仅是一、两包，而是八包十包。一天，丽莲又带着十包椰浆饭到雪华家温习功课，雪华有事走不开，丽莲便将饭拿到厨房，想放进冰箱里。结果，她发现冰箱里满满地塞着一包包的椰浆饭，都是雪华向她购买的。当雪华到厨房找丽莲时，看见她愣愣地站在冰箱前，呆视着眼前堆积如山的饭包。

室内空气紧张，一片静寂。……

“你们都不喜欢吃椰浆饭，你为什么还要常常买呢？”

“我——我——”雪华嗫嚅着，半晌，艰难的解释：“你每天放了学，还得赶着买东西赚钱，这样一定是很苦很忙的，尤其是最近学校测验多，会考又快到了，你怎能应付呢？我又帮不了你的忙。我想如果我向你多买一些，你便会快点卖完，不必花太多时间在路上叫卖，可以回家多温习了。”……

“我不知道该怎样感激你，你这样帮我，必定用了你妈妈不少钱了。”

“你放心！我用的全是我储蓄的钱。”

雪华忙不迭的加了一句。

丽莲想起雪华休息时经常不到食堂去买点心吃，原来是为了省下钱来买她的椰浆饭，她心里有说不出的难过。²⁷

丽莲心里有说不出的难过，然而雪华的懂事、两人之间的真挚友谊也让读者很难不被深深感动。

康乐活动

在互联网和平板电脑出现之前，儿童的康乐活动很多时候是需要运用四肢的。八十年代的儿童玩具中虽然已出现了电子游戏机，但是由于价格昂贵，并非每个家庭能够负担得起，因此故事里的主人翁玩的通常是传统的玩具或游戏。

在《秀秀和启华的日记》里，主人翁秀秀和邻居法蒂玛一起到联络所去看人比赛藤球。除了藤球场，联络所里还有篮球场、羽球场……

喜欢运动的人可以参加各种球类或拳术班，喜欢静的人可以参加象棋会、文学会、口琴班和美术班；想要学一门手艺的人可以参加缝纫班、家政班和插花艺术等班级。²⁸

年纪小小的秀秀便对缝纫班很感兴趣，想学会裁剪，给自己缝制衣服，但是妈妈要她先读完小学，会考及格后，大一点才去联络所学习裁剪。

《小顽皮学乖了》的第二章里对孩子们之间的游戏有着生动的描绘²⁹——主人翁可欣和其他的寄宿生课余在园子里喧闹地玩着跳绳游戏“zero point”、追逐游戏“瞎眼猫”，不爱跑动的则坐在树荫下用粘土捏成各种小动物，一动一静、错落有致的描写呈现出一幅欢快的热闹画面，让读者透过文字感受到孩子们的快乐和天真无邪。

结语

综上所述，1980年代的儿童小说中所展现的“新加坡儿童”大致可勾勒出这么一个轮廓：

- 他们多数出身中下阶层，少数来自富裕家庭；
- 他们多数住在组屋里；
- 孩子们的父母大多对他们的学习成绩要求甚高，有些甚至极为苛刻，只有少数父母持无所谓态度；
- 孩子们的品格都相当淳朴，他们之间的友谊也大多纯真诚挚，较少出现以功利为出发点，或分数、金钱至上的心态；
- 孩子们大多喜爱参与运动、传统游戏和康乐活动，只有少数热衷于看电视和玩电子游戏机。

若与现今新加坡社会的儿童相比，以上除了第三点外，其他恐怕大不相同。新加坡近年来经济增长强劲，2013年的国民人均收入为66, 298新元，³⁰已可与经济强国美国看齐，因此来自贫困家庭的儿童应比三十多年前少得多；不少家庭也逐步提升住宅环境，迁入私人房产。如果说三十多年前有部分父母对孩子的学习要求很高，那如今这样的父母只是有增无减，以致于少年儿童因学习压力而患上精神和情绪疾病的情况有显著的增加。³¹社会风气对高收入、高消费生活方式的追捧，除了影响父母，也会影响孩子，因而如今本地儿童年纪小小就出现虚荣、功利心态已不足为奇。而自从平板电脑问世后，经常可在公共场所看到专注在电脑上玩游戏或看影片的儿童“低头族”，其中不少还是父母主动为孩子携带电脑，以避免孩子因跑动玩乐而发出喧闹声。

另一方面，纵观这些八十年代的新加坡儿童小说，也同样可以归纳出一些特点：

- 有些小说虽然添加了科幻元素，³²或以拟人化方式从物体的角度描绘故事情节，³³但是在谈到现实情况时，绝大部分作品还是以写实手法去揭露孩子们所遭遇的问题，例如前文所述秀花、丽莲的家境问题；或揭露社会上存在的一些现象，如因家长外出工作而出现的锁匙儿

童、³⁴因家庭破裂而出现的问题少女等。³⁵

- 作为儿童读物，这些小说传递的通常都是正面的讯息和价值观，如不能偷窃、³⁶路不拾遗、³⁷帮助弱小、³⁸协助长辈、³⁹爱护动物、⁴⁰爱惜东西、⁴¹“满招损，谦受益”等。⁴²
- 作为新加坡作品，一些小说内容不忘增添本地色彩，如介绍组屋生活、军营生活、⁴³各种美食，⁴⁴或宣扬种族和谐等。⁴⁵

儿童文学在八十年代初受到本地各界人士众声喧哗的讨论。其中，文化部还在1980年主办了“儿童故事”创作比赛，以期起到抛砖引玉的作用，而在收到的172篇参赛作品中，107篇以英文写作，65篇以华文写作。⁴⁶

虽然政府、文坛和出版界都有所动作，希望能够改善华文儿童文学作品量少的情况，然而，数年后南马文艺研究会会长张发依然慨叹东南亚华文儿童文学的创作不受重视，以致发展缓慢，作品短缺。他认为，东南亚的华文作家都较忽略儿童文学的创作，有些甚至认为儿童文学属“小儿科”，不屑一顾。他指出，在新加坡与马来西亚，从事华文儿童文学创作的人也不多，约各有十人而已；而每年出版的儿童文学不超过五十种，其中本地创作，富有本地色彩的还占不到百分之三十，这是因为在新加坡，以中外名著或儿童读物改编的作品往往比富时代和民族色彩的原创作品更受欢迎。⁴⁷

作家洪生（白里红）回忆1980年他到小学图书馆去参观时，发现十本华文儿童读物中竟有八本是民间故事。十年后，虽然许多出版社每年都大量出版儿童读物，但是根据粗略统计，一年里上市的约百来种儿童读物，其中绝大部分是翻译、改写或重述外国的民间故事；出版商要找人创作儿童文学时，竟无人问津。⁴⁸时任勿洛集选区议员的黄海博士也指出，1988年本地有2074本书籍出版，其中只有179本是儿童故事书。他强调，儿童故事写作者应以新加坡人事为题材；写作者必须忠实地写出他们的生活，反映出都市的特色，城

市的景观和多元文化社会的姿采，因为这正是我国儿童需要阅读的故事。⁴⁹

有言论认为，本地写作人不热衷于儿童文学创作，最大原因相信是没有受到应有的鼓励；儿童文学创作者在本地是默默耕耘的一群，他们只能自费出版，自负盈亏。⁵⁰

姑且不论儿童文学创作者是否真的不受重视或没有受到鼓励，二十多年后的今天，当我们回首儿童文学在新加坡文艺发展史中挣扎求存的过程时，便碰到了一个甚具反讽意味的后遗症：如果说，在照相机尚未发明的年代，文字的描绘如同为当年的人留下影像的话，那么没有足够的文字记载便等于没有留下充分的影像，让后人得以从中了解当年的人的面貌。换句话说，我们现在无法单从八十年代出版的儿童文学中去充分地了解当时新加坡儿童的生活面貌，是因为当年没有创作出足够的作品去记录儿童们生活中的方方面面，所以必须依靠报章报道、照片等其他材料的辅助。可悲的是，这个现象一直存在，从建国初期直至今天，以本地生活为背景的儿童文学一直得不到充裕的滋养，发展不起来。

笔者虽然尽量从能够找到的文学作品中去归纳出八十年代新加坡儿童的特征，但是由于符合探讨范围的资料有限，因此他们的面貌还是模糊的、不完整的，甚至片面的。然而，正因如此，这些儿童文学作品才更显得难能可贵，幸好当年尚有这一批文艺作者和出版社⁵¹愿意逆流而上，不计盈亏地为儿童们创作出适合他们的本地读物。由于他们的努力，八十年代新加坡儿童在文学作品中留下的面貌身影即便模糊残缺，却不致于一片空白。◆

注释

^[1] “王鼎昌吁书籍出版商应该多为我国儿童出版民间故事书：唯需具有本地色彩及文化传统”，刊1979年9月1日《星洲日报》，页4。

^[2] “文化部主办儿童故事创作比赛：当局吁请本地作家积极参加比赛”，刊1980年5月8日《星洲日报》，页11。

^[3] 例如郑雯“重视儿童文艺创作”，刊1980年3月26日《星洲日报》页26；夏澄“推广儿童文学的具体方法”，刊1980年3月31日《南洋商报》页10；火雷红“我对新一年文坛的展望”，刊1981年1月6日《南洋商报》页30；李建“我国儿童文学写作的

^[4] 新方向”，刊1981年4月3日《星洲日报》页25；陈彦“八一年儿童文学回顾”，刊1982年1月7日《星洲日报》页30；洪荣狄“出版儿童书籍”，刊1983年2月4日《星洲日报》页32；笋心“鼓励儿童文学”，刊1983年6月9日《联合早报》页15；李汝琳“儿童文学应当受到重视”，刊1983年6月10日《联合早报》页42等。

^[5] “80年代的新加坡文艺”，刊1980年1月1日《星洲日报》，页24。

^[6] “谈我国儿童文学”，刊1979年7月27日《星洲日报》，页22。

^[7] 《小顽皮哭了》，页72；《小顽皮学乖了》，页125。

^[8] 谭秉“新加坡·香港·南韩·台湾：美国人眼中的‘亚洲四小龙’”，刊1981年8月29日《星洲日报》，页49。

^[9] Aleshire, I. [1985, November 13]. More living space in today’s homes: average number of persons per room drops. *The Straits Times*, p.16.

^[10] 《我的世界快乐多》，页2–3。

^[11] 《小顽皮学乖了》，页65–76。

^[12] 同上，页100–01。

^[13] 青青草《跳字手表》，见《跳字手表》，页8。

^[14] Toh calls for higher levels. [1965, August 29]. *The Straits Times*, p.15.

^[15] Intensive Govt effort to train skills for many industries. [1965, December 5]. *The Straits Times*, p.13.

^[16] Need for overseas training for growth of electronics industry. [1971, January 14]. *The Straits Times*, p.4.

^[17] Engineer head-hunting here and abroad for MRT. [1983, November 27]. *The Straits Times*, p.11.

^[18] Best way to keep up with today’s needs – by SIM chief. [1967, February 8]. *The Straits Times*, p.12.

^[19] 孟紫《可怜的小龙》，见《跳字手表》，页31–40。

^[20] 《我是小顽皮》，页88–93；《小顽皮学乖了》，页93–98。

^[21] 《漫游新加坡》，页29–30、47–49。

^[22] 陈森汉《妈妈，你还爱我吗？》，见《儿童故事：入选作品》，页11–20。

^[23] 石君《我要100分》，见《小树·小树》，页75–82。

^[24] 何晓《玲玲的星期天》，见《玲玲的星期天》，页76–85。

^[25] 君盈绿《不能公开的礼物》，见《跳字手表》，页62–76。

^[26] 同上，页64–65。

^[27] 《小顽皮哭了》，页44–56。

^[28] 《我的世界快乐多》，页35–36。

^[29] 《秀秀和启华的日记》，页18。

^[30] 《小顽皮学乖了》，页11–14。

^[31] Latest data from Department of Statistics Singapore, http://www.singstat.gov.sg/statistics/latest_data.html (last accessed 24 February 2014).

^[32] “因过度追求完美，更多青少年患强迫症”、“家长‘望子成龙’是孩子患病祸首”，刊2001年3月3日《联合早报》，页6。

^[33] 青青草《小凡的太空朋友》、君盈绿《不能公开的礼物》，见《跳字手表》，页41–50、62–76。

^[34] 孟紫《一张课桌的奇遇》和《可怜的小龙》，见《跳字手表》，页11–20和31–40。

^[35] 《妈妈，我回来了》里的诗慧。

^[36] 《压伤的芦苇》里的美娟。

^[37] 陈彦《老师、我错了》，见《跳字手表》，页26–30。

^[38] 郑慧华《一盒彩笔》，见《儿童故事：入选作品》，页36–41。

^[39] 陈森汉《快乐回来了》，见《儿童故事：入选作品》，页66。

^[40] 石君《那双手》，见《小树·小树》，页56–60。

^[41] 陈绿薇《独眼兔》，见《儿童故事：入选作品》，页42–48；石君《麻雀》，见《小树·小树》，页19–24。

^[42] 杨秋卿《小玉的洋娃娃》，见《儿童小说》，页6–10。

^[43] 杨秋卿《演奏会上》，见《儿童小说》，页15–17。

^[44] 《秀秀和启华的日记》，页16–17。

^[45] 石君《午餐》，见《小树·小树》，页1–4。

^[46] 石君《朋友们》，见《小树·小树》，页6–10；《秀秀和启华的日记》，页8–9。

^[47] 丹那巴南（外交兼文化部长）“序言”，见《儿童故事：入选作品》，页iii。

^[48] “东南亚华文作家忽略儿童文学创作”，刊1988年8月16日《联合早报》，页4。

^[49] 洪生“新华儿童文学景观（上）”，刊1990年7月1日《联合早报》，页45。

^[50] “儿童宜培养阅读习惯，不应沉迷电子游戏中”，刊1990年9月7日《联合早报》，页5。

^[51] 向民“重视儿童文学创作”，刊1987年5月30日《联合早报》，页20。

^[52] 例如教育出版社、联邦出版社、世界书局有限公司、泛亚有限公司、胜利书局、胜友书局等，见“积极推广儿童文学创作”，刊1980年3月29日《星洲日报》页23。

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சிங்கப்பூர் பெண் எழுத்தாளர்கள் — ஒரு பார்வை

Sundari Balasubramaniam is a librarian with the National Library's Content and Services division. Her responsibilities include managing and developing content as well as providing reference and research services. She also manages the Tamil collection at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library.

To trace the history of Singapore Tamil literature, one has to start from the period when Singapore was part of the Federation of Malaya. Tamil literature in Singapore gained momentum only after the country's independence in 1965.

In the early 1900s when Tamil literature was in its infancy, writers were predominantly males. There were only a few female writers. One of them was Usha Nair, who started writing in 1948, and another was Kamatchi Arumugam (originally from Ipoh, Malaysia), who wrote from 1949 onwards. We can acknowledge them as the first Singapore Tamil female pioneer writers.

When the daily newspaper, *Tamil Murasu*, was launched in 1935, there were many opportunities for people of all ages to demonstrate their talents. *Tamil Murasu* ran monthly short story writing competitions, students' creative sections, literary competitions, story writing workshops, literary appreciation workshops and much more, which kindled the aspirations of local literary enthusiasts. With this encouragement, Singapore women writers like Kamala Durai, Letchumi Rajakrishnan, Vedamani George, Selvi, S. Sridevi and A. Parvathi were spurred on to take an active interest in writing.

In the 1980s and 1990s, more Singaporeans as well as expatriates started contributing to the literary world. The first Tamil female writer to have her book published (*Vasanthathin Vasalile*, a collection of short stories, 1984) was Sankari Ramanujam. Today, we see many publications written by various prolific female writers, with the younger generation making themselves heard across digital platforms. Their writings portray the essence of day-to-day life with characters that we come across in our daily lives. This article introduces Kamaladevi Aravindan, Jeyanthi Sankar, Nurjahan Sulaiman, Mathangi, Latha and Suriya Rethnna who

are all very active in the Singapore literary scene today.

Kamaladevi Aravindan is a bilingual author who writes in Malayalam and Tamil. She has written short stories for *Tamil Murasu* and for newspapers in Malaysia. She has written many novels, radio and TV plays, as well as articles for various reputed Tamil and Malayalam magazines published in Singapore and overseas.

Kamaladevi is a three-time winner in the short story competitions conducted by *Tamil Nesan*, a Malaysian daily, and has won several prizes in radio drama competitions held in Malaysia. She was bestowed the prestigious Karikalan award for her novel *Nuval* in 2012. This annual award is organised by Musthafa Tamil Trust, Singapore.

Jeyanthi Sankar, a permanent resident of Singapore, has been writing since 1995. She has written many short stories, essays and novels. She has received numerous awards and accolades for her works in Singapore and India. Her works have been translated into English and other Indian languages. Her book *Naalegal Dollar* was recommended for the Read! Singapore campaign by the National Library Board in 2006. She received the prestigious Karikalan award for her novel *Thirinthalaikum Thinaigal* in 2013.

Nurjahan Sulaiman was born in Singapore. In spite of a childhood mired in poverty, she managed to develop an interest in Tamil literature and has been writing since 1966. Her first book of poetry *Uyir Nilavu* was published in 2011 and she was also the first Muslim woman in Singapore to publish a book of poems. Since then she has published two novels. Her writings are based on real life situations and her characters depict the sufferings of people from all walks of life.

Mathangi is one of Singapore's up-and-coming Tamil writers and her works have been published in newspapers, magazines and literary websites in Singapore, Malaysia and India. She is an active partici-

pant in many of the literary events organised by organisations promoting Tamil literature. Her short stories and poems are reflections of Singapore and its people.

Kanagalatha (Latha) is currently the Sunday editor of *Tamil Murasu*. She has published two collections of poetry in Tamil: *Theeveli (Firespace)* (2003), and *Paampu Kaattil Oru Thaazhai (A Screw pine in a Snake Forest)* (2004). She also published a short story collection titled *Naan Kolai Seiyum Pengal (Women I Murder)* in 2007, which won the biennial Singapore Literature Prize in 2008. Her poems and short stories have been published in *Words, Home and Nation* (1995), a multilingual anthology published by The Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore; *Rhythms*, a Singaporean Millennial Anthology of Poetry, published by the National Arts Council (2000); *Fifty on 50* and *Tumasik* published by the National Arts Council (2009); and various Tamil literary journals in India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and France. Her works have been translated into English, French and German.

Her bilingual poem *Still Human, Poems on the Move* series was featured on MRT trains by the National Arts Council (1996), and *Karanguni* was displayed in the MOVING WORDS 2011 showcasing Singaporean literature on the MRT network by The Literary Centre (2011).

Suriya Rethnna, a former school teacher, has written for Singaporean and Malaysian Tamil newspapers, as well as for local radio and television stations. Her works include fiction, non-fiction, plays and translated works. She has won several competitions in Singapore and Malaysia, and was awarded the Montblanc-NUS-CFA Young Writers' Fellowship in 1998. Her first novel *Merkkey Uthikkum Sooriyan (The Sun Rises in the West)*, published in 1989, was the first Tamil novel published by a female writer in Singapore.

சிங்கப்பூரில் ஆங்கிலம், சீனம், மலாய் தமிழ் ஆகிய நான்கு அதிகாரத்துவ மொழிகளிலும் இலக்கியங்கள் தோன்றி வளர்ந்த விதத்தை வரலாற்றுப் பூர்வமாக ஆராய முற்படும்போது மலாயாவிலிருந்துதான் அவ்வரலாற்றை நாம் தொடர வேண்டியுள்ளது. 1965க்குப் பிறகுதான் சிங்கப்பூர் இலக்கியத்திற்கு ஒரு தனிப்பட்ட வரலாறு அமைகிறது.

19ஆம் நூற்றாண்டின் தொடக்கத்தில் தமிழ் இலக்கியம் வேர்விடத் தொடங்கிருந்தாலும் ஆண்களே படைப்பிலக்கியத் துறையில் அதிகம் பங்காற்றினர். பத்திரிகைகளுக்கு எழுதிய பெண்கள் மிகச் சிறுபான்மையினரே. உஷா நாயர் என்பவர் 1948 முதற்கொண்டும், திருமதி காமாட்சி ஆறுமுகம் (ஈப்போ) 1949 முதற்கொண்டும் எழுதி வந்துள்ளனர். மலாயாவில் ஐம்பதுக்கு முன்னர் எழுதத் தொடங்கிய இவர்களைப் பெண் எழுத்தாளர்களின் முன்னோடிகள் என்பதில் தவறில்லை.

திருமதி கமலாதுரை சிங்கப்பூர் வானொலியில் பெண் எழுத்தாளர்களுக்கெனச் சிறுகதைகளை வாசிக்கும் தனியேர் நிகழ்ச்சியைப் படைத்ததோடு மட்டுமல்லாமல் அறுபதுகளில் தமிழ் முரசில் சிறுகதைகள் படைத்தவர். எழுபதுகளிலும் எண்பதுகளிலும் தமிழ் முரசில் கதைகள் படைத்துச் சிறுகதை வரலாற்றில் தனக்கென ஓர் இடம் பெறுபவர் லட்சுமி ராதாகிருஷ்ணன் ஆவார்.

தமிழ்முரசு நடத்திய மாதாந்திரச் சிறுகதைப் போட்டிகள், மாணவர் மணிமன்றம், தமிழர் திருநாள் இலக்கியப் போட்டிகள், கதை வகுப்பு, ரசனைவகுப்பு போன்றவை ஏற்படுத்திய இலக்கிய எழுச்சி காரணமாகவும் திருமதி வேதமணி ஜார்ஜ், செல்வி, எஸ். ஸ்ரீதேவி, அ. பார்வதி போன்ற பெண்கள் எழுத்துத்துறையில் தடம் பதித்தனர்.

எண்பதுகளில் உள்ளூரில் பிறந்து வளர்ந்த படைப்பாளிகளாகவும், இங்கேயே வேருன்றிய எழுத்தாளர்களாகவும் சிறுகதைத் துறையில் முனைப்புக் காட்டியவர்கள் சூர்ய ரத்னா, பால மலர், இலட்சுமி தனகோபால், கண்ணம்மா, நூர்ஜஹான் சுலைமான், லதா, கல்பனா கலியபெருமாள், பிரபாவதி தாஸ், இலட்சுமி இராதாகிருஷ்ணன், முத்துலட்சுமி கருப்பையா போன்றோர். முதன்முதலில் நூல் வெளியிட்ட பெண் எழுத்தாளர் என்ற பெருமை அமரர் சங்கரி இராமானுஜம் அவர்களையே சேரும். அவருடைய வசந்தத்தின் வாசலிலே என்ற சிறுகதைத் தொகுப்பு நூல், 1984 இல் வெளிவந்தது.

இன்று பலர் எழுத்துத் துறையில் தங்கள் திறமையை வெளிக்கொணர்கின்றனர். கல்வியிலும் பொருளாதாரத்திலும் மேம்பட்டுள்ளதால், தங்கள் படைப்புகளை புத்தகமாகவும் பலர் வெளியிட்டுள்ளனர். தகவல் தொழில்நுட்பம் முன்னேறிய இக்காலகட்டத்தில் பலரும் மின் வலைதளங்களிலும் தங்கள் படைப்புகளை வெளியிடுகின்றனர். அவர்களுள் சிலரை இக்கட்டுரையில் காணலாம்.

திருமதி கமலா தேவி அரவிந்தன் (KAMALADEVI ARAVINDAN)

கமலாதேவி அரவிந்தன் பிறப்பால் மலையாளி எனினும் தமிழ்ப்பால் தணியாத காதல் கொண்டவர். மிக இளம் வயதிலேயே எழுத ஆரம்பித்து இன்று வரை எழுதி வருபவர். தம் தாய்மொழியான மலையாளத்திலும் தமிழிலும், ஏறக்குறைய 120 சிறுகதைகள், 18 தொடர்கதைகள், 142 வானொலி நாடகங்கள், 100க்கும் மேற்பட்ட இலக்கியக் கட்டுரைகள் எழுதியுள்ளார். தமிழிலும் மலையாளத்திலும் 22 மேடை நாடகங்களை எழுதி இயக்கியுள்ளார். சிங்கையில், மலையாளத்தில் முழு நீள ஆய்வு நாடகம் எழுதி இயக்கிய முதல் பெண் எழுத்தாளர் இவர். மலையாள நாடகத்துறையில் விருதுகளையும் சவால் கிண்ணங்களையும் இவர் பெற்றிருக்கிறார். தமிழ்நேசன் நடத்திய சிறுகதைப் போட்டியில் மும்முறை முதல் பரிசு பெற்றிருக்கிறார். தமிழ் மலரில் ஏழு முறை இவரின் சிறுகதைகள் சிறப்புச் சிறுகதையாக வெளிவந்துள்ளன. மலேசிய வானொலி நடத்திய நாடகப் போட்டிகளில் பலமுறை முதல் பரிசு பெற்றுள்ளார். தமிழ்நாடு, கேரளப் பல்கலைக்கழகங்களில் ஆய்வுக்கட்டுரைகள் படைத்துள்ளார். தமிழ், மலையாளம், என இரண்டு மொழிகளிலும் சிறந்த இலக்கியங்களை மொழி பெயர்த்துள்ளார். சிங்கப்பூரின் தமிழ் படைப்பிலக்கிய உலகில் பெயர் பதித்துள்ள முக்கியமான எழுத்தாளர்.

சமூகத்தில் வலுவிறந்தோர் படும் இன்னல்களை அப்படியே படும் பிடித்து, கதை மாந்தர்களின் மொழியில் அவருக்கே உரிய தனித்துவம் பெற்ற பாணியில் எழுதும் இவரின் எழுத்து அக்கால வாசகர்களையும் இக்கால வாசகர்களையும் கவர்கிறது எனக் கூறலாம். இதற்குக் காரணம் இவரின் எழுத்தில் புத்தாக்கச் சிந்தனையும், உண்மைச் சம்பவங்களின் பாதிப்பும் பொதிந்திருக்கும்.



கமலாதேவி அரவிந்தன் (Kamaladevi Aravindan) - தமிழ், மலையாள எழுத்தாளர், நாடக ஆசிரியர், விமர்சகர், ஆய்வுக்கட்டுரையாளர், நூலாசிரியர்.

இவரின் துரியகிரஹணத் தெரு சிங்கப்பூரின் இருண்ட வெளியைக் காட்டுகிறது. அப்பாவிப் பெண்கள் ஏமாற்றப்பட்டு, எப்படிப் பாலியல் தொழிலுக்கு வருகிறார்கள் என்பதை உணர்த்த எழுதிய கதை. இதற்காக, அந்தப் பெண்களைத் தேடிச் கண்டுபிடித்து அவர்களோடு உரையாடி இக்கதையை வடித்துள்ளார். நுகத்தடி என்ற கதையில் மனநலம் பாதிக்கப்பட்டவர்களைப் பற்றி எழுதியுள்ளார். அதற்காக ஒரு மனநலக் காப்பகத்திற்குச் சென்று ஆய்வுசெய்து இக்கதையை எழுதியுள்ளார். இவரின் கதைகள் யாவும் பெண்கள் சார்ந்த, பெண்களின் பிரச்சினைகளைப் பேசும் கதைகளாகும். துரியகிரஹணத் தெரு, நுவல் என்ற இரு நூல்களை வெளியிட்டுள்ளார் கமலாதேவி அரவிந்தன். இலக்கிய உலகுக்கு இவர் ஆற்றும் பணியினைச் சிறப்பிக்கும் விதமாக 2013ஆம் ஆண்டு இவரின் நுவல் நூலுக்கு கரிகாலன் விருது வழங்கப்பட்டது.

ஜெயந்தி சங்கர் (JEYANTHI SANKAR)

ஜெயந்தி சங்கர் தன் வாழ்விடத்தின் இருப்பையும் வாழ்வையும் சிறுகதைகளாகவும் நெடும்புனைவுகளாகவும் எழுதுவதன் மூலம் அவற்றை உலக அனுபவங்களாக்குவார். எளிய நிகழ்வுகளையும் உலக வாழ்வின் அனுபவமாக உணர வைப்பதே இவரது எழுத்தின் வெற்றி எனலாம். தனது சூழலையும் சமூகத்தையும் துருவி ஆராய்ந்து புனைவுகளாக சிருஷ்டிக்கும் இவரின் ஆற்றலானது உலகளாவிய தமிழிலக்கியப் பெருந்திரையில் ஒரு நிரந்தர இடத்தைப் பொறித்து வருகிறது.

மதுரையில் பிறந்த இவர் 1990 முதல் சிங்கப்பூரில் பொறியாளரான கணவர் மற்றும் இரு மகன்களுடன் வசித்து வருகிறார். எழுத்து தவிர இசையிலும் இவருக்கு ஆர்வமுண்டு. ஓர் எழுத்தாளராகத் தான் உருவாக முக்கிய காரணம் தனது தொடர்ந்த வாசிப்பும் அதற்கு உறுதுணையாக அமைந்த சிங்கப்பூரின் நூலகங்களுமே என்கிறார்.

எளிய எதார்த்த நடையில் எழுதும் இவர் சீனக் கலாசாரத்தின் மீது தனி ஆர்வத்தினை வளர்த்துக் கொண்டிருக்கிறார். நிறைய சிறுகதை, கட்டுரை, குறுநாவல் மற்றும் நாவல் போன்றவற்றை எழுதியுள்ள இவர் ஏராளமான பரிசுகள் வாங்கியுள்ளார். உலகளாவிய வாசகர்களைப் பெற்ற இவர் சிங்கப்பூரைக் களமாகக் கொண்ட இவரின் புனைவுகளுக்காகப் பரவலாக அறியப் பெறுபவர். நாலேகால் டாலர், முடிவிலும் ஒன்று தொடரலாம், ஏழாம் சுவை, பெருஞ்சுவருக்குப் பின்னே, பின் சீட், வாழ்ந்து பார்க்கலாம் வா, நியாயங்கள் பொதுவானவை, சிங்கப்பூர் வாங்க என நீள்கிறது இவருடைய படைப்புகளின் வரிசை. இதுவரை இவர் வெளியிட்டுள்ளவை ஆறு சிறுகதைத் தொகுதிகள், ஒரு குறுநாவல், ஐந்துபுதினங்கள், ஆறு கட்டுரைத் தொகுதிகள் மற்றும் நான்கு மொழிபெயர்ப்புகள் ஆகியன. இவரின் ஒவ்வொரு நூலும் ஒவ்வொரு வகையில் கவனிக்கத் தகுந்தவை. சிங்கப்பூரின் தமிழ் இலக்கியத்தின் பக்கம் உலகத் தமிழர்களின் பார்வையைத் திருப்பக்கூடியவை. தமிழ்க்கொடி 2006 என்ற ஆழி பதிப்பகத்தின் ஆண்டு மலர் போன்ற பல்வேறு நூல்களிலும் இவரது கட்டுரைகள் வெளியாகியுள்ளன.



ஜெயந்தி சங்கர் (Jeyanthi Sankar) - சிறுகதை, நெடுங்கதை, கட்டுரை, புதினம் மற்றும் மொழிபெயர்ப்பு நூல் படைப்பாளர்.

தமிழ் முரசு, முன்பிருந்த சிங்கை எக்ஸ்பிரஸ், சிங்கைச் சுடர் போன்றவை அவரின் எழுத்துச் சோதனைகளுக்கு நல்ல தளங்களாயின. திண்ணை, திசைகள் தவிர சமாச்சார், இ-சங்கமம், தமிழோவியம், தட்ஸ் தமிழ், பதிவுகள் நிலாச்சாரல் போன்ற மின்னிதழ்களிலும் இவரின் சிறுகதைகள், கட்டுரைகள் பிரசுரிக்கப் பட்டுள்ளன. இவரின் எழுத்துகள் சிங்கப்பூர் வாழ்வியலையும் அதன் பின்புலத்தையும் சார்ந்ததாகும். சமூகப் பிரச்சனைகள், பெண்கள் சார்ந்த நிகழ்வுகள், மனதை நெருடவைக்கும் நிகழ்வுகள் ஆகியன இவர் கதைகளின் கருப்பொருள்களாகும். 2006 - சிங்கப்பூர் தேசிய நூலக வாரியத்தின் வருடாந்திர வாசிப்போம் சிங்கப்பூர் இயக்கத்தில் related reading பிரிவில் நாலேகால் டாலர் சிறுகதைத் தொகுப்பு வாசகர்களுக்குப் பரிந்துரைக்கப் பட்டது. இலக்கிய உலகுக்கு இவர் ஆற்றும் பணியினைச் சிறப்பிக்கும் விதமாக 2013ஆம் ஆண்டு இவரின் திரிந்தலையும் திணைகள் நூலுக்கு கரிகாலன் விருது வழங்கப்பட்டது.

நூர்ஜஹான் சுலைமான் (NURJAHAN SULAIMAN)

சிங்கப்பூரில் பிறந்து வளர்ந்த நூர்ஜஹான் சுலைமானின் இலக்கியப் பயணம் 1966 ஆம் ஆண்டு வானொலியில் ஒலிபரப்பான அவரது முதல் கட்டுரையுடன் தொடங்கியது. கவிதை, சிறுகதை, கட்டுரை, நாடகம், எனப் பல தளங்களில் இயங்கிவரும் நூர்ஜஹான் சுலைமான் ஜஹாக் பீவி என்னும் புனைபெயரிலும் எழுதிவருகிறார். சிங்கப்பூர்த் தமிழ் முரசு

நாள்திலும், வானொலியும் இவரது இலக்கிய வளர்ச்சிக்குப் பெரும்பங்காற்றியுள்ளன. உயிர் நிலவு என்ற கவிதைத் தொகுப்பினை 2011 இல் வெளியிட்டு சிங்கப்பூரில் கவிதை நூல் வெளியிட்ட முதல் முஸ்லீம் இனப் பெண் படைப்பாளி என்ற பெருமை பெருகிறார்.

எல்லோருக்கும் புரியும் எளிய மொழியில் தமது வாழ்வின் அனுபவத்தையே கவிதையாகவும் கதைகளாகவும் வடித்துள்ளார். நூர்ஜஹான் தனது இளமைக் காலக் கனவுகளை மிகுந்த சிரமங்களுக்கு இடையில் தொடர்ந்தாலும், தமிழ் மீது கொண்ட காதல் குறையவில்லை. அதன் தாக்கத்தை இவரின் படைப்புகளில் காணலாம். இவரின் உயிர் நிலவு அதற்கு ஒர் உதாரணம்.

மற்றொரு வெளியீடான பொழுது புலருமா என்ற நாவலில் காதலை மையப்படுத்தியுள்ளார். உடல் சார்பற்ற, - மனத்தளவில் ஒன்றிய, காலவெள்ளத்தையும் கடந்து நிற்கும் ஒரு தெய்வீகக் காதல் கதையை கருப்பொருளாக்கிச் சிறப்பாகப் படைத்துள்ளார். வேர்கள் என்ற இவரது நாவலில் குடும்ப உறவுகளின் மேன்மையைச் சித்திரித்துள்ளார். புலம்பெயர்ந்த தமிழர்களின் பூர்வீகப் பூமியான தமிழ்நாட்டில் தொடங்கி சிங்கப்பூர், தமிழ்நாடு என மாறி மாறித் தன் வேர்களை விரிக்கிறது. சராசரி வாழ்வில் பழகிப்போன சாமானியர் ஒருவரின் வாழ்க்கைச் சம்பவங்களையும் உறவுகளும் நட்புகளும் அவரது வாழ்க்கையில் உண்டாக்கிய சுகங்களையும் சோகங்களையும் எளிய நடையில் நாவலாக்கியுள்ளார். இதில் பத்து விழுக்காடு மட்டுமே கற்பனை. மீதி 90 விழுக்காடு உண்மைச் சம்பவங்களின் அடிப்படையில் வரையப்பட்டவை.



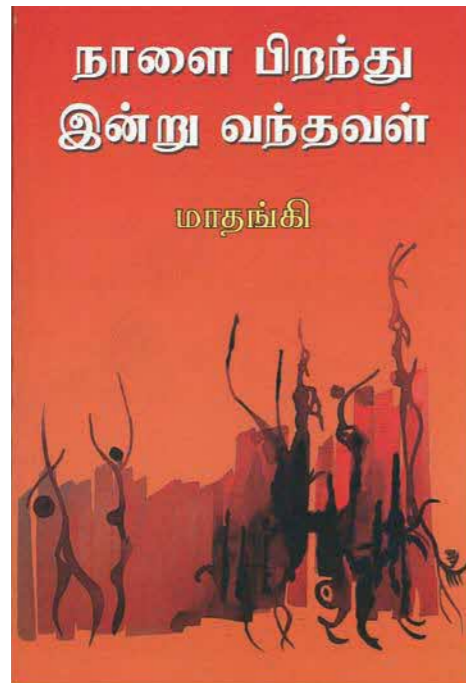
நூர்ஜஹான் சுலைமான் (Nurjahan Sulaiman) - கவிஞர், சிறுகதை மற்றும் நாவலாசிரியர்

மாதங்கி (MATHANGI)

புதிய தலைமுறை சிங்கப்பூர்த் தமிழ் எழுத்தாளர்களுள் குறுகிய காலத்தில் பெரிய அளவில் தன்னை அடையாளப்படுத்திக் கொண்டிருப்பவர் மாதங்கி. திருநெல்வேலி மாவட்டத்தைச் சேர்ந்த மாதங்கி 1993 ஆம் ஆண்டு முதல் சிங்கப்பூரில் தம் குடும்பத்தினருடன் வசித்து வருகிறார். படிக்கும் காலத்திலேயே எழுதத் துவங்கினாலும் இவரின் சிறுகதை முதலில் பிரசுரமானது 1988 ஆம் ஆண்டு சுமங்கலி என்ற இதழில்தான். பின் சிங்கையில்ல்தான் இவரின் இலக்கிய வேட்கை தீவிரமடைந்தது எனச் சொல்லலாம். இவர் எழுதிய கதைகள், கவிதைகள் தமிழ் நாட்டு இதழ்களிலும், பத்திரிகைகளிலும் சிங்கைத் தமிழ் முரசு, மலேசிய தமிழ் நேசன் நாழிதழ்களிலும், திண்ணை போன்ற மின் இதழ்களிலும் வெளிவந்துள்ளன.

கடந்த 25 ஆண்டுகளாக கனமான வாசிப்பிலும் சீரான படைப்பெழுத்துத் துறையிலும் ஈடுபட்டிருக்கும் மாதங்கி, சிங்கப்பூர் வாசகர் வட்டம், கவிச்சோலை, கவிமாலை, தங்கமீன் வாசகர் சந்திப்புக் கூட்டம் முதலானவை நடத்தும் மாதாந்திர இலக்கிய நிகழ்வுகளிலும் பங்கேற்றுத் தம் படைப்புத் திறனை வெளியிட்டு வருகிறார். பல பரிசுகளையும் வென்றுள்ளார்.

ஒருகோடி டாலர்கள் என்ற சிறுகதைத் தொகுப்பில் இடம்பெறும் மாந்தர்கள் குழந்தைகளாக, பதின்மவயதினராக, வேலை செய்யும் தம்பதியராக, இல்லத்தரசிகளாக, மாமியார்களாக, உடன் பிறந்தவர்களாக, மூத்தகுடும்ப உறுப்பினர்களாக, திருநங்கையராக இயங்குகிறார்கள். இவர்கள் சிங்கப்பூரில் குடியேறிப் பெரும்பாலும் வீடமைப்பு வளர்ச்சிக் கழகத்தின் அடுக்குமாடி வீடுகளில் வசிக்கிறார்கள். இவர்களின் பிரச்சினைகளை அலசி ஆராய்கிறது இத்தொகுப்பு. இவரின் மற்றொரு படைப்பான நாளை பிறந்து இன்று வந்தவள் என்ற கவிதை நூலில் பலமொழிக் கலாசாரம் கொண்ட சிங்கப்பூரில் வாழும் தமிழர்களின் சுய அடையாளங்களை மிக நேரடியாக எளிய மொழியில் கவிதைகளாக வடித்துள்ளார்.



மாதங்கியின் இரு நூல்கள்



லதா (Latha) - கவிதை, புதினம், சிறுகதை மற்றும் கட்டுரைப் படைப்பாளர்.

லதா (LATHA)

இலங்கையில் நீர்கொழும்பில் பிறந்த லதா 1982இல் குடும்பத்துடன் சிங்கப்பூருக்குக் குடிபெயர்ந்தார். இருபது ஆண்டுகளாக சிங்கப்பூர் தமிழ் முரசு பத்திரிகையில் செய்தி ஆசிரியராகப் பணியாற்றும் இவர் தீவெளி (கவிதைகள் 2003), பாம்புக் காட்டில் ஒரு தாழை (கவிதைகள் 2004) என்ற இரு கவிதைத் தொகுதிகளையும் நான் கொலை செய்யும் பெண்கள் என்ற சிறுகதைத் தொகுப்பையும் வெளியிட்டுள்ளார். நான் கொலை செய்யும் பெண்கள் நூலுக்கு 2008 ஆம் ஆண்டுகான சிங்கப்பூர் இலக்கிய விருது வழங்கப்பட்டது. லதாவின் கவிதைகள் மற்றும் சிறுகதைகள் கணையாழி, காலச்சுவடு, உயிர்நிழல், குங்குமம் போன்ற இதழ்களிலும் வல்லினம், தங்கமீன் போன்ற மின்னிதழ்களிலும் வெளிவந்துள்ளன. இவரது தீவெளி நூல் தமிழ்நாடு பெரியார் பல்கலைக்கழகத்தின் இலக்கியப் பாடத்திட்டத்தில் சேர்க்கப்பட்டுள்ளது குறிப்பிடத்தக்கது.

தேசியக் கலைகள் மன்றம் தொகுத்த நூற்றாண்டுக்கால சிங்கப்பூர்க் கவிதைகள் பன்மொழித் தொகுப்பிலும், கனவும் விடிவும் என்ற இந்திய சாகித்திய அகாதமி வெளியிட்ட தற்காலத் தமிழ்ப் பெண் கவிஞர்கள் தொகுப்பிலும் இவரது கவிதைகள் இடம் பெற்றுள்ளன.

சூர்ய ரத்னா (SURIYA RETHNNA)

சிங்கப்பூரிலேயே பிறந்து வளர்ந்த மூன்றாவது தலைமுறையைச் சேர்ந்த சூர்ய ரத்னா ஒரு முன்னாள் ஆசிரியை. 1986லிருந்து உள்ளூர் மலேசியத் தமிழ் பத்திரிக்கைகளுக்கும், உள்ளூர் வானொலி தொலைக்காட்சி நிலையங்களுக்கும் எழுதி வருகிறார். சில நாடகங்களில் நடித்தும் இருக்கிறார். கதை கட்டுரை போட்டிகளில் இவருடைய படைப்புகளுக்குப் பரிசுகள் கிடைத்ததோடு 1998 ஆம் ஆண்டில் Montblanc-NUS CFA இளைய எழுத்தாளர் அங்கீகாரத்தையும் பெற்றார். புதினம், புதினம் அல்லாத எழுத்துக்கள், நாடகம், மொழி பெயர்ப்பு நூல்கள் போன்றவை அவரது படைப்புகளில் அடங்கும். மேற்கே உதிக்கும் சூரியன் என்ற தனது முதல் நாவல் மூலம் சிங்கப்பூர் பெண் எழுத்தாளர்களிலேயே முதலில் நாவல் பதிப்பித்தவர் என்ற பெருமையை அவர் பெற்றார்.

தேசிய கலைகள் மன்றத்தின் (NAC) மானியம்பெற்று வெளிவந்த இவரின் குழந்தைக் கதைகள் பாலர் பள்ளிகளிலும் தொடக்கநிலைப் பள்ளிகளிலும் விரும்பி வாங்கப்பட்டன. 2005இல் சிங்கை தமிழ் பத்திரிக்கையான தமிழ் முரசில் வெளிவந்த சொல்லத்தான் நினைக்கிறேன் என்ற சிறுகதை, இளைஞர்களுக்கான அறிவியல் புனைகதை என்னும் பிரிவில் இவர் காட்டிய முதல் முயற்சியாகும்.

தங்கமீன் பதிப்பகத்தின் வெளியீடான சிங்கப்பூர் பெண் எழுத்தாளர்களின் சிறுகதைகளில் இவருடைய முகமூடி என்ற கதையும் பிரசுரிக்கப்பட்டுள்ளது. தங்கமீன் மின்னிதழில் உண்மையைப் போன்ற கதைகள் என்ற அடைமொழியோடு வெளிவந்த 15 சிறுகதைகளைத் தொகுத்து நான் என்ற புத்தகமாக வெளியிட்டுள்ளார். இத்தொகுப்பில் இடம்பெற்றுள்ள இறைவனின் குழந்தை என்ற கதை 2013 ஆம் ஆண்டில் தேசிய நூலக வாரியத்தின் வாசிப்போம் சிங்கப்பூர் இயக்கத்திற்குத் தேர்வு செய்யப்பட்டது. ♦



சூர்ய ரத்னா எழுதிய 'நான்' சிறுகதைத் தொகுப்பு



சூர்ய ரத்னா (Suriya Rethnna) - புதினம், நாடகம், மொழிபெயர்ப்பு நூல், கட்டுரை மற்றும் சிறுவர் இலக்கியப் படைப்பாளர்.

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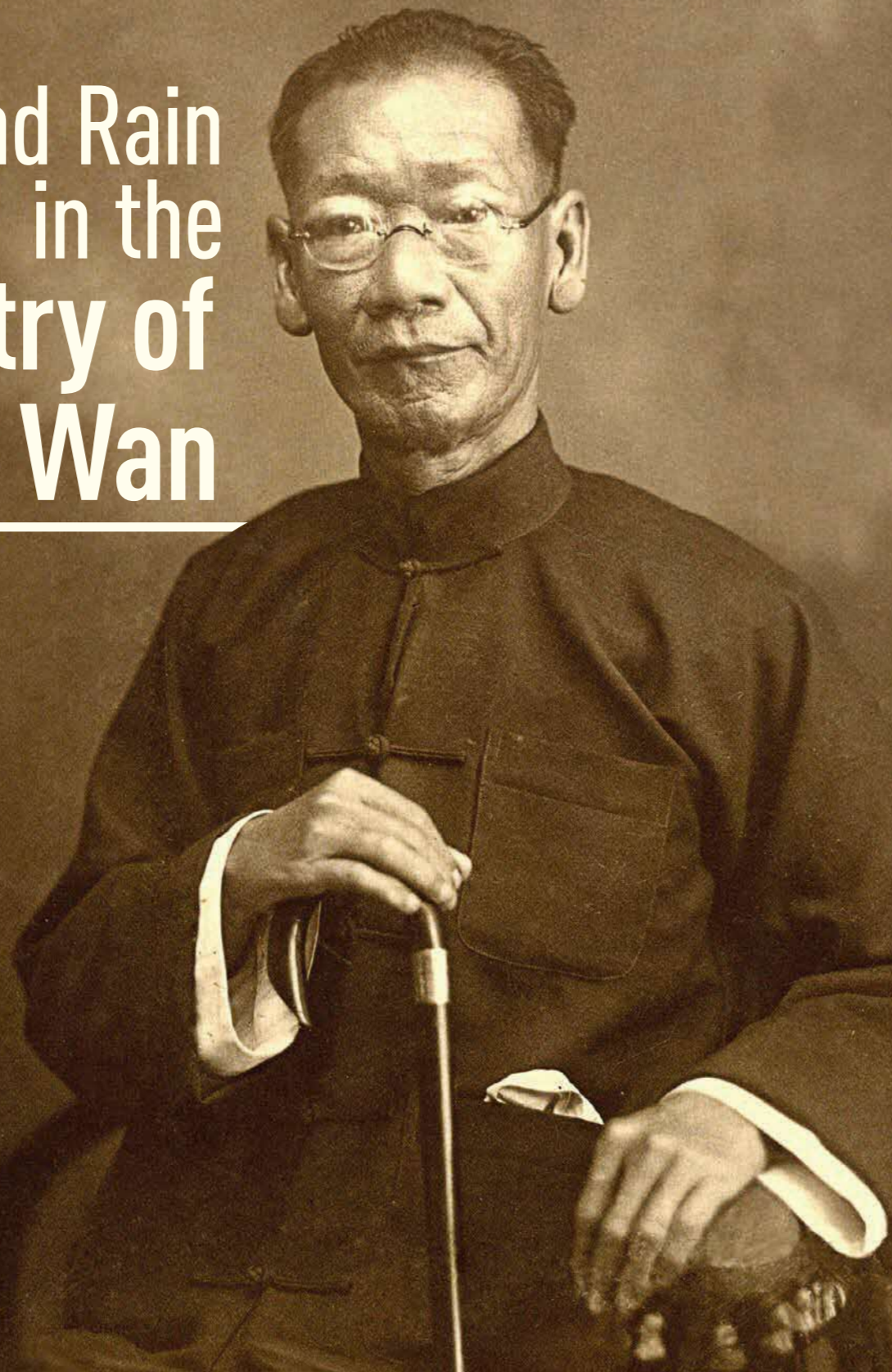
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Heat and Rain in the Poetry of Khoo Seok Wan



Ho Yi Kai is a Senior Editor with World Scientific Publishing Co, Manager and Assistant Editor-in-Chief of World Century Publishing Corp, and the Assistant Director of Pioneers' Memorial Hall. He obtained his BA from Peking University, and MA and PhD from Nanjing University. He was a researcher for the recent "Khoo Seok Wan: Poet and Reformist" exhibition organised by the National Library.

Khoo Seok Wan in his later years.
All Rights Reserved, the late Khoo Seok Wan
Collections, National Library Board, Singapore
2013. Courtesy of Ong Family, descendants of
Khoo Seok Wan.

Khoo Seok Wan (1874–1941), the multi-talented Chinese scholar and poet is considered by many to be one of Singapore's best and most prolific literary pioneers. Khoo was a man of many hats: a practical Confucianist, staunch Buddhist, passionate newspaperman and an ardent reformist, who at the same time was known for his chivalry and reputation for living life to the fullest.

Born in Haicheng in Fujian Province, China, Khoo settled in Singapore with his parents when he was eight years old. His father, Khoo Cheng Tiong, who was in his twenties when he arrived in Singapore, was a successful rice merchant and a prominent community leader.

Educated in the Confucian tradition, Khoo Seok Wan returned to his hometown in China when he was 15 to prepare for the all-important Chinese imperial examinations. In 1894, he passed the provincial level of the examinations and attained the level of *juren* (举人), which meant that he qualified to sit for the next level conducted by the central government in Beijing the following year. However, Khoo was unsuccessful in his attempt, and in 1896 he returned to Singapore somewhat disheartened.

Khoo and his siblings came into their inheritance after their father's death and Khoo stayed in Singapore for good. Like most Chinese literati of the day, Khoo led an extravagant lifestyle during his early years, enjoying life's many pleasures. Besides managing the family business, he advocated the promotion of culture and education, founding poetic societies such as Lize and Huiyin, and establishing the Singapore Chinese Girls' School with prominent contemporaries such as Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang. He even edited the *Thousand Character Classics: A New Version* (《新出千字文》), probably the earliest existing original Chinese preschool text in Singapore.

As a newspaperman and journalist, he founded the newspaper *Thien Nan Shin Pao* (《天南新报》) in 1898, became chief editor for *Cheng Nam Jit Poh* (《振南日报》) in 1912, and was appointed editor for the literary supplement of *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (《星洲日报》) in 1929. Politically, Khoo supported the reformists, in particular, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, contributing financially and helping out where he could.

As a result of his extravagant ways Khoo went bankrupt when he was 34; this was a major turning point in his life and led him to live the rest of his life frugally. As the Chinese poetry pioneer of Nanyang, Khoo had written more than a thousand poems in the traditional form. His works include *Notes of Khoo Seok Wan* (《菽园赘谈》), *Collected Poems of Xiao Hong Sheng* (《啸虹生诗钞》), *Five Hundred Stones: A Collection of Literary Criticism* (《五百石洞天挥麈》), including his poetry collection *Collected Poems of Khoo Seok Wan* (《丘菽园居士诗集》) edited by his family.

TROPICAL HEAT

Singapore, known as "Sin Chew" or "Xingzhou" (星洲) in Khoo's day, is the same tropical island it is today, experiencing uniform temperatures throughout the year, with high humidity and abundant rainfall.¹ Records from the 19th century reveal the weather to be quite unexciting: "hot and no chill", "sunny at times, rainy otherwise", "rain at times but no downpour. The sun rises [at] 5am, starts setting from 5pm, consistent through the year. Hot in the day, cool at night, the same through the seasons", "sun and rain are well regulated, sunny three days in five, rain in the other two, never long draught nor prolonged rain".² All rather prosaic and humdrum, but when reinterpreted poetically by Khoo, readers are able to experience the tropical climate in vivid detail and in ways hitherto unknown. The unconventional descriptions in Khoo's poems depict the multifariousness of the weather accurately and at the same time open up a window to the poet's innermost thoughts and feelings.

The intense heat was, of course, a notable feature of Sin Chew's tropical climate, and Singapore was thus given the moniker "Yanzhou" (炎洲), meaning "hot island". The heat was unbearable, especially in the absence of rain and modern conveniences such as electric fans and air-conditioning that we enjoy today. The Westerners living in Singapore felt the oppression of the weather, as did Khoo.³ He felt trapped and helpless as expressed in his poems, "nowhere to hide in the flaming heat",⁴ using hyperboles such as the "boiling sea", "scorching moon" and "burning river" to bring his experience to life:

Bitterly hot for consecutive nights
The heat evaporates all water in every corner

Clear ripples
shining the jade-green Nymphoides

The bright moon
scorching red pearls

苦热连宵甚，炎蒸遍水隅。
清波明翠，月灼红珠。⁵

It seems like the summer has not ended
The awe of the heat still accumulated within the island
Half the river seems burning in red
Thousands of trees enveloped in green

犹未销残暑，炎威积岛中。
半江红似烧，万树绿交笼。⁶

This helplessness resulting from an inescapable situation made the poet lose hope in the gods (老天) – "useless deity in heaven stimulating poetry" (天公无用把诗催) – the only consolation from the deity was probably the material that Khoo was able to use in his writing and poetry.⁷

TROPICAL RAIN

Apart from the heat, “wetness” also features prominently in Khoo’s poems. Let’s take a look at his description of the wet season:

In the midst of the rainy season

The hot island is experiencing a spike in chill
Seeing the starving rat jumping around the stove
The freezing fly seeking refuge through the curtain

殊方当雨季，炎岛陡寒增。
窥灶腾饥鼠，穿避冻蝇。⁸

The wet season comes along with the winter moon

A sudden change in weather in the hot island
The swallows in the roof move
seeking refuge

The croaking frogs in the trees know the rain

湿季随冬月，炎洲候忽差。
移巢避燕，知雨树鸣蛙。⁹

Both poems are written in similar styles, highlighting the scale of the tropical downpours and their sudden onset, causing the usually hot island to experience a sharp drop in temperature. The reader is left with an acute sense of how uncomfortable this is and animals, which as the sensitive and observant poet shares, are not spared either – the rats, flies, swallows and frogs are described as hungry and freezing, dodging and croaking.

In other poems, we see “winter in the hot island experiences rain for consecutive days” [炎洲冬序雨连朝],¹⁰ “long days of continuous rain” [长日连番雨]¹¹, “in the beginning of winter, the rain never stops” [冬首雨连绵], “among the clouds in the hills, the screen is suspected to be heavy” [山云疑幕重]¹² – all pointing to the prolonged rain in Sin Chew and how thick and weighty the clouds could get.

Khoo also recorded some fascinating and peculiar climactic occurrences, for instance, “on the island, there is always this unusual phenomena that the sun and rain, dry and wet, are separated at one place at the same time”. Many Singaporeans will be familiar with this experience, particularly while travelling along an expressway in the pouring rain, and then suddenly transitioning into dry and sunny weather, a distinct veil of rain separating the two as it were. Khoo materialised this observation with two poems titled “Inspired by the Sunny Rain” {《晴雨即事》}: “the front hall receives heat while the back is cool/ the cloudy and sunny are separated in half without a wall” [前堂迎煖后堂凉，分半阴晴不隔墙], “the occasional rain blocks the southern travel out

of the sudden/ splitting the north and south in a sunny day/ it has always seemed borderless by a glance/ but suddenly, it feels like it has been halved with boundaries” [时雨南行忽阻前，截将南北昼晴天。由来一望原无界，陡觉中分自有边]，[何须寒暖随朝暮，燥湿同时感自然]。¹³

This also occurred in mountainous areas as is described in in another poem “Description at the Sight of the Sunny Rain, Requesting a Poem in Reply from Ven Chi Chan” {《晴雨同时，触目述怀，索痴禅开士和》}: “Rain in the southern mountains but not in the north” does not seem as intriguing.¹⁴

In fact, Khoo’s poems about the weather are at their best when he writes about scenes when the rain has just stopped. He wrote, “A rain in the morning brings the chill from the sea” [一雨朝来海气凉],¹⁵ “the rain just past and summer feels cool” [一雨才过觉夏凉],¹⁶ “the roof turns green after the rain, where the doves play in the sun/ the little courtyard starts to feel the chill” [雨馀簷绿闹晴鸠，一味凉生小院幽]¹⁷, “the accumulated rain sends cold flood in the wind” [积雨通寒汛飘风].¹⁸

The following two poems offer a more holistic post-rain view of Sin Chew:

Winter in the hot island experiences rain for consecutive days
When the fog sets apart the vegetation stands tall

Under the dancing moon
the jade-green coconut trees kept in close order
The rainbow drinking from the stream leans over the long bridge
Entering the smog without having the straw raincoat prepared
Ploughing together by the side of the field

I can plough barefooted
Shall meet companions in times of flooding

炎洲冬序雨连朝，宿雾开时草木骄。
舞月翠椰排密阵，饮溪红霓卧长桥。
渔蓑未办烟中入，耘杖相期陇畔招。
脱足耕吾尚可，倘容沮溺遇同侨。¹⁹

The rain shows compassion after the prolonged heat
Feeling the shower in front of the window

Within the winding dock
a lonely flower stands bright

Through the cold smog
a heron flies

久热雨相怜，临窗一洒然。
孤花明曲坞，只破寒烟。²⁰

And amidst all this chill during and after the rain, it is alcohol that keeps the poet warm. He says, “How best to defend from the chill?/ Little sips of strong wine” [敌寒何物最？小酌有醇醪].²¹

Khoo’s poetry transcends time and space and vividly brings the weather conditions of late 19th- and early 20th-century Sin Chew to life. His tactile and realistic descriptions go beyond the visual, encompassing elements of sound, sight and touch.

OTHER INFLUENCES

In the “rain” poems, other aspects of the poet are revealed, such as his Buddhist and Zen beliefs, both of which are common themes in his writing. These influences are also reflected in his work, for instance, while admiring lotus and bamboo in the garden after the rain he felt “this celebrated scene qualifies to be presented to Buddha”.²²

Some “rainy” poems relate to his life in his later years. Khoo’s poetry during this period are mainly scenic descriptions, written in a relaxed tone. For instance, in “After the rain on a Summer’s Day” {《夏日雨霁》} the poet felt that the birds spoke “in a happy tone” [含乐意], the clouds “played with sunlight” [逗晴光], and “the senior villagers without any headdress are sitting at the moment/ using flowers and banana leaves as clothes calling it their attire” [此时野老科头坐，卉带蕉衫称野装].²³ Other examples include “Discussing agriculture with the island farmers during free time/ plowing through the green field quick and deep” [闲与岛农谈圃学，扶犁绿野快深耕]²⁴, “seeing rain after prolonged heat” [久热得雨], and “lying in bed listening to the noisy magpies/ one can be accommodated for being free and relaxed” [高卧绳床听鹊噪，世容无事作闲人].²⁵

Among these later works, we can sometimes sense his loneliness, such as in “Scene in the Rain” {《雨中即景》} where he celebrates having the company of poems in old age and sees himself as “[f]ortunate to have poems to expend the everlasting days/ not feeling the aged loneliness though retired and idle”.²⁶

Khoo’s poetry transcends time and space and vividly brings the weather conditions of late 19th- and early 20th-century Sin Chew to life. His tactile and realistic descriptions go beyond the visual, encompassing elements of sound, sight and touch. The beauty of traditional Chinese poetry shines through in Khoo’s works: the monotonous climate of the tropics is painted in glorious brushstrokes of colour and brought to life, exciting our senses, reminding us to be more sensitive to our surroundings and to engage nature in more visceral ways. ♦

All English translations for the poems and their titles were provided by the author.

Notes

- National Environment Agency website, <http://app2.nea.gov.sg/weather-climate/climate-information> [Assessed: 8 September 2013]
- 《新嘉坡风土记》，见饶宗颐编《新加坡古事记》，香港：中文大学出版社，1994年，页167。
- “...it is the moist heat which makes it unpleasant”.见Hugh Wilkinson, *Sunny Lands and Seas*, 见Michael Wise, *Travellers’ Tales of Old Singapore*, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2008, p.125
- 《二月七日早，枕上闻雨》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》二编，页3。
- 《二月十六夜，东滨苦热》，同上。
- 《八月苦热》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》二编，页26。
- 《苦热不雨，戏为俳体》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》二编，页19-20。
- 《岛上雨季》其一，见《丘菽园居士诗集》初编卷六，页11。
- 《湿季》其一，见《丘菽园居士诗集》二编，页45。
- 《岛上雨后，极目写怀》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》初编卷六，页14。
- 《连番雨》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》二编，页57。
- 《冬首雨》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》初编卷六，页16。
- 《晴雨即事》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》二编，页22。
- 《晴雨同时，触目述怀，索痴禅开士和》，同上，页23。
- 《雨后极目》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》初编卷二，页18。
- 《夏日雨霁》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》二编，页7-8。
- 《雨过即事》（自注：在禧街振南社作），见《丘菽园居士诗集》初编卷四，页4-5。
- 《积雨》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》初编卷二，页11。
- 《岛上雨后，极目写怀》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》初编卷六，页14。
- 《雨后感咏》其一，见《丘菽园居士诗集》二编，页42。
- 《敌寒》，同上，页57。
- 《小园雨过，起视荷竹，生趣盎然，漫赋一首》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》初编卷二，页11。
- 见《丘菽园居士诗集》二编，页7-8。
- 《对雨作》，同上，页52。
- 《久热得雨》，见《丘菽园居士诗集》二编，页3-4。
- 同上，页15。

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《丘菽园居士诗集》. Call Number: Chinese C811.07 CSY饶宗颐编（1994）。《新加坡古事记》，香港：中文大学出版社。Call Number: Chinese 959.57 JTI -[HIS]

Michael Wise[2008], *Travellers’ Tales of Old Singapore*, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions. Call number: English 915.957043 TRA -[TRA]

“Qiu Shuyuan Biography”, NLB website: <http://exhibitions.nlb.gov.sg/literarypioneers/writers/chinese/qiushuyuan/index.php> [Accessed: 8 September 2013]

National Environment Agency website, <http://app2.nea.gov.sg/weather-climate/climate-information> [Assessed: 8 September 2013]



THE ARTS HOUSE
10 YEARS

Going Places

The Place Poetry of Singapore

Paula Sim is a recent graduate of the National University of Singapore and is an aspiring actor currently on the Programming team of The Arts House.

In conjunction with its 10th anniversary celebrations, The Arts House presents an audio poetry exhibition entitled "Going Places", which features 45 recordings by some of Singapore's most well-loved poets on familiar places in Singapore. Some of these poems include *Bras Basah* by Edwin Thumboo; *Shophouse, Victoria Street* by Eileen Chong; *Katong* by Damon Chua; and *Elegy for Changi Beach* by Robert Yeo.

The exhibition invites the visitor to embark on a lyrical journey of Singapore's cityscape and history through the personal memories of poets who have captured some of the changes Singapore experienced between 1953 and 2014. This poetic approach to the individual experiences of the writers' will draw on original audio-visual portraits of the city-state, highlighting its rich literary history and artistic diversity.

In the attempt to regain what has become "forgotten", the exhibition hopes to remind Singaporeans of the city's lost buildings and iconic landmarks through poetry, set against a background of constant flux and urban development. The poems cover various locations all over the island, and they span the spectrum of urban, natural and architectural typologies found in Singapore. Many of the poems are set in the city central area such as Bras Basah, Raffles Place and Singapore River. Some focus on Singapore's attractions – Botanical Gardens and MacRitchie Reservoir for instance – while others wax lyrical about the HDB heartlands, including Clementi, Punggol and Toa Payoh. Others consider buildings that have disappeared from the cityscape, like the former National Library on Stamford Road.

As The Arts House enters into a new decade and celebrates its 10th anniversary with the theme *The Next Page*, it is paramount that in our re-imagining of how things could be, we also take the opportunity to remember how things were. The exhibition reminds Singaporeans to appreci-

ate the roles that these iconic places have played in shaping the city we have come to know, and also recognises how far we have come over the past 50 years. While the poems might reflect the poets' personal memories of these places, their words trigger the collective memories that many other Singaporeans associate with these same places and the plurality of meanings attached.

Terence Heng provides such an example:

*Racks of clothes along racks of clocks, as
if ticking away the fashion of the eras.
Fortune telling weight machine, I never
stepped on one before. Durian sign sale,
bicycle underneath no-bicycle sign.
Rusty trishaw parked outside renovated
lifts. And an old dental surgery somewhere
next to an older barber in the HDB.
Urn, three joss sticks burnt out sometime ago.*

– Excerpt from "Postcards from Chinatown",
Terence Heng (October 2009)

Here, the poet expresses a sense of nostalgia for a place that is vastly different between how he remembers it to be and how commercialised it is now. While his descriptions of some of these sights and sounds of Chinatown may be specific to a particular space and time, they nevertheless paint a picture of a place that is familiar to us all. By actively remembering a place for what it once was, or while it still exists, the poet keeps it alive in the national rhetoric. In this interplay between memory and loss, "Going Places" hopes to keep these places alive in spite of their absence from the cityscape.

What "Going Places" does hope to ultimately achieve is to provide Singaporeans with an alternate perspective of the places that are already familiar to them. Take the Merlion for example;



Chinatown in 1998.
Image courtesy of
Terence Heng.

while it may not have "organically" morphed into a legitimate national icon, it still has had a lasting influence on the sense of history and national identity of Singaporeans. The exhibition features a number of Merlion poems that reflect the connection (or lack thereof) that Singaporeans may feel toward this somewhat kitschy icon.

*But this lion of the sea
Salt-maned, scaly, wondrous of tail,
Touched with power, insistent
On this brief promontory...
Puzzles.*

– "Ulysses By The Merlion", Edwin Thumboo

*I am the scion of a wealthy race.
I wear the silver armour of my moneyed
people.*

– "The Merlion To Ulysses", Lee Tzu Pheng

All the poems featured in the exhibition are accompanied by the voice recordings of the poets reading their work(s) and recounting the occasional inside-story behind the poem. While the memories may be specific to the poets themselves, the ideas and histories of the places that they mention undeniably form a part of who we are as Singaporeans whether we choose to accept it or not. Places such as Chinatown, with its contrasts between new and old, "authentic" and "artificial", form a part of our multifarious "rojak culture" as described by Terence Heng.

Old images and videos of Singapore provided by the National Archives Singapore (NAS) are showcased alongside the poems, providing audiences with a more immersive and meaningful experience of the exhibition.

While the visual aspect of the exhibition may invoke feelings of displacement and a melancholic loss of history and the familiar physical identifiers of space, "Going Places" hopes to inspire Singaporeans to remember the city as they know it and to create new memories of the Singapore we experience today. ♦

"Going Places" is held at the Print & Film Gallery at The Arts House between 26 March and 18 May 2014.

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exhibition

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library@esplanade.com.sg.



programmes

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