

NEW WRITERS FOR FEST

This year's Writers Fest will feature literary stars and emerging voices in Singapore



Adeline Chia
Arts Correspondent

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Cunningham and popular Taiwanese illustrator Jimmy Liao will be among the headliners in the Singapore Writers Festival, the biggest event on the literary calendar this year.

Other featured authors in the 10-day festival in November run the gamut from high-brow literary stars to populist writers.

The latter includes the British-born essayist Pico Iyer, most-known for his writings on travel; firebrand political commentator and activist Marina Mahathir, daughter of former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad; prominent Taiwanese novelist Huang Chunming; and Man Asian Literary Prize winner and Korean novelist Shin Kyung-sook.

The \$1.5-million festival, which runs from Nov 2 to 11, will feature more than 185 writers involved in 200 programmes, including panel discussions, lectures, workshops, meet-the-author sessions and literary meals - where participants get to get up close and personal with writers over food.

A significant new addition to the festival this year is the SWF Fringe, a series of night-time programmes at The Arts House exploring desire and sexuality in books, films, performances and visual arts.

The night events, which are open only to those aged 21 years and above, include panel discussions such as one on E.L. James' bestselling erotic books, titled *The Fifty Shades Of Grey Phenomenon: What Turns Women On?*, and another on whether women write better sex scenes than men, titled *Pillow Fight*.

Under the leadership of festival director Paul Tan, the festival was a smash hit last year, attracting 13,500 attendees

despite festivalgoers having to pay to access most of the events. The record visitorship was 27,000 in 2009, but most of the events then were free.

Like in the previous year, there will be a Festival Pass priced at \$15 that covers entry to more than 100 events, such as panel discussions and meet-the-author sessions. Other events such as the keynote lectures and masterclasses will still be individually priced from \$10.

This year's festival, which is in its 15th edition, has the theme *Origins*. Tan, 41, says that he wants "Singaporeans to think about their origins - whether ethnic, national or beyond - and also reflect on what constitutes originality".

That is why this year's programme will focus on story-telling, biographies and historical fiction.

Local authors will also get their time in the sun. These include perennial favourite Catherine Lim, who will be hosting a literary meal. The novelist will also appear in a session in conversation with Marina Mahathir.

Other local names making appearances are prominent Chinese novelist and Culture Medallion recipient You Jin, as well as poets Alvin Pang and Boey Kim Cheng.

In addition, some new local voices will be making themselves heard at the Singapore Writers Festival this year.

These young writers come from diverse backgrounds, and include a 22-year-old former juvenile delinquent who wrote a tell-all book about sexual abuse and crime, as well as a young adult fiction writer who at 19, already has two best-selling Malay romances to her name.

Other emerging writers featured on the programme include a university professor, Dr Krishna Udayasankar, who pens historical epics in her free time, and a precocious young poet from Raffles Institution, Theophilus Kwek, who is taking his A Levels this year.

The 18-year-old student says: "I always feel guilty when I write. I'm supposed to be studying for my A Levels. Being invited to the Writers Festival was completely unexpected and an honour. I'm really excited."

Promoting and celebrating young writers has always been part of the raison d'être of the festival, director Tan says. "We hope to encourage Singaporeans to realise and grow the recognition for the



PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM, SINGAPORE WRITERS FESTIVAL, RICHARD PHIBBS, ST FILE

nation's writers and their work, and their unique ability to connect to a Singapore readership."

This year's festival first-timers are different from the usual clutch of alumni from the Creative Arts Programme from secondary schools and junior colleges. A featured fresh face of this lineage is Kwek, who had a poetry collection called *They Speak Only Our Mother Tongue* out last year by Ethos.

Debutante writer Jolene Goh is one who bucks the trend. She will be launching her memoir called *Jolene's Story*, put out by local publisher Marshall Cavendish. It is a candid story about her abuse by her stepfather, her subsequent life of drugs, petty crime and gangs and eventually being sent to a girls' home.

Besides appearing at her book launch, Goh will speak on a panel called *You Can Write Too*, where first-time authors share their experiences on how they picked up writing.

Another unconventional writer featured in the festival is Mumrah Jaafar, 19, who wrote two popular novels under the pen name Nitrosette. *Ikhlas*, A.K.I (2011), *Yours Sincerely*, Adam Khalis) and *Nah. Untuk Anak* (2012, *This Is For You*), sold 11,000 and 7,000 copies respectively in Singapore and Malaysia.

She will be appearing on the panels *Up And Coming*, where young literary talents talk about how they got their first break, and a session on Malay writers called *Off The Page: A For Alpha*.

Meanwhile, Dr Udayasankar, 34, takes a trip into mytho-historical India in *2,000BC* with her debut novel *Govinda*, which will be launched at the festival. About the epic clash of two rival

"My ego wants to feel great about it - being on the same platform with Michael Cunningham and Pico Iyer. But who am I kidding? I see myself as a newbie, as a struggling writer"

Journalist Zafar Anjum (far right), 37, one of the emerging writers to be featured, together with university professor Dr Krishna Udayasankar (right)



factions in an ancient civilisation, *Govinda* is the first in a series called *The Aryavarta Chronicles*.

Besides the book launch, Dr Udayasankar, who is a business lecturer at the Nanyang Technological University, will be speaking at two panels: on the future of South Asian literature, and globalisation.

Another festival newbie is journalist Zafar Anjum, 37, who is launching two books, a collection of short stories titled *Singapore Decalogue*, and *The Resurgence Of Satyam: The Global IT Giant*, a journalistic piece about how a scandal-

hit Indian IT services company, Satyam, bounced back to business.

Anjum, who is the Asia online editor of four technology websites at the Australian media group Fairfax Business Media, says that he is grateful for the opportunity that is given to him, being featured in the festival, which he has attended regularly since 2005.

"My ego wants to feel great about it - being on the same platform with Michael Cunningham and Pico Iyer at the festival. But who am I kidding? Cunningham and Iyer are accomplished writers and they have huge bodies of work to boast of.

"I see myself as a newbie, as a struggling writer."

Last year's festival was characterised by a cosy, convivial vibe where visitors got up close and personal with writers in two specially constructed tents called *Festival Pavilions* on Singapore Management University Campus Green.

Festival director Tan says that his team received good feedback on these pavilions and will re-erect those tents.

The rest of the festival activities will be spread out over eight venues in the Bras Basah-Bugis district, including the Singapore Arts Museum, live music pub

Switch and The Peranakan Museum.

Tan says he wants to create "the same buzz and collegial atmosphere in the civic district, to make it a friendly place where book lovers and people interested in discussing ideas and writing can come together".

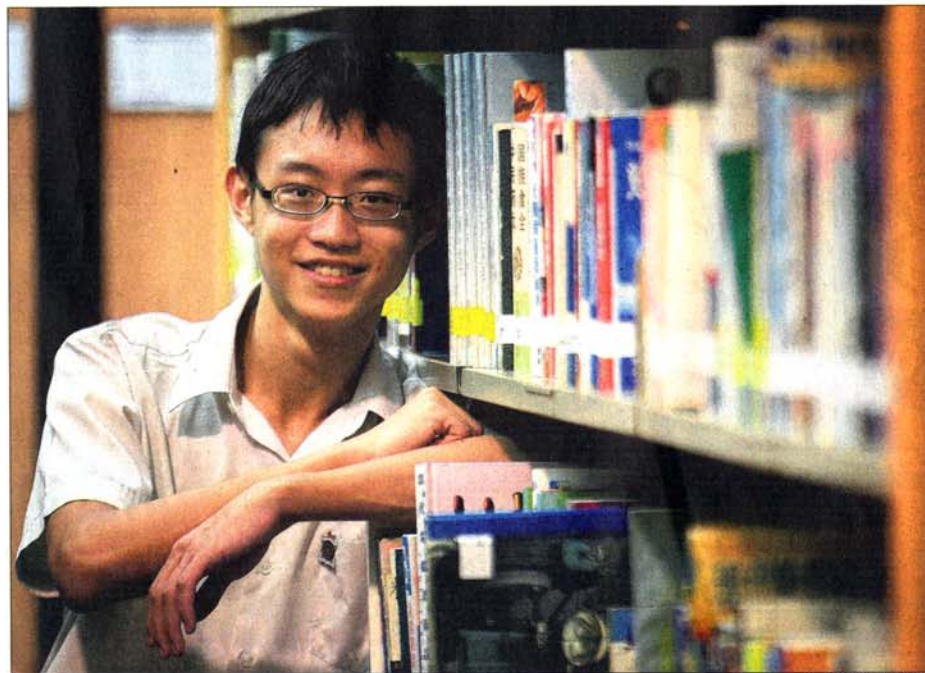
As for some of the sound problems in the venues last year, he says that "we will ensure venues we work with are conducive for good discussion".

He adds that this year's festival has a greater focus on Chinese, Malay and Tamil programmes this year so as to reach out to non-English readers.

For example, as part of the festival's literary pioneer series, there will be an event on the Malay poet Masuri S.N.'s work at the National Museum to celebrate the pioneer writer's work.

Tan adds that where possible, programmes have a bilingual element or translations, so that more Singaporeans can access them. "There is a wealth of non-English Singaporean stories and poetry waiting to be enjoyed and talked about."

✉ chiahta@sph.com.sg
 www.facebook.com/chiahta



ST PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM

“I always feel guilty when I write. I’m supposed to be studying for my A Levels.”

Theophilus Kwek (above), 18, from Raffles Institution, whose poetry collection, *They Speak Only Our Mother Tongue*, was launched last year by Ethos



She wrote to keep mind off grief

Munirah Jaafar’s first novel, penned under the pseudonym Nirrosette, was written after her father died of a heart attack in 2010.

What was originally a project to keep her mind off the grief turned into a best-selling Malay young adult novel, *Ikhlas, A. K.!* (Yours Sincerely, Adam Khalis!), about a rich playgirl who has everything except her parents’ time and attention.

The book, published when she was 17, sold 10,000 copies in Singapore and Malaysia.

She followed it up with *Nah, Untuk Awak!* (This Is For You), about how a girl whose father died and whose boyfriend dumped her for her best friend survives the tragedy with the help of friends. This sold 7,000 copies.

Munirah is one of the featured writers in this year’s Singapore Writers Festival, which has a focus on emerging writers.

Now 19, and a first-year student at the National Institute Of Education training to be a Malay language teacher, she says she took up a pen name because she thought people would be turned off to find out her identity and real age.

She sent the first few chapters of her book to her publisher, Malaysian house *Jemari Seni*, under the pseudonym. Her books have struck a chord in

young readers, drawn to the mix of English and Malay in her stories. About 30 per cent of her characters’ dialogue is written in English.

She says she receives fan mail from readers ranging from their tweens to 50s, encouraging her to continue writing. “Most of the readers are in their 20s. They say that they really love my heroes,” she adds.

She is now thinking about her third novel, which will probably be about a long-distance relationship.

The Innova Junior College graduate has always contributed stories on friendship, family and romances to Malay newspaper *Berita Harian*.

She has an older brother, 23, and two sisters aged 14 and nine. Her mother is a retail assistant.

She says her late father, who had worked in engine maintenance in Singapore Airlines, had always encouraged her to write.

“During some weeks when I was too busy and didn’t get published in *Berita Harian*, he would ask me, ‘Where are your stories? When will you write again?’

“He cut out every single story and laminated them. They are still on the walls of my room.”

“He cut out every single story and laminated them.”

Munirah Jaafar (left) on how her late father encouraged her to write

22-year-old's memoir on sexual abuse

Most people will be hard-pressed to write a memoir at the age of 22, but Jolene Goh has plenty of material.

Coming from a broken family with a history of drug abuse and crime, she was sexually abused by her stepfather in primary school, started glue-sniffing, running drugs, and joining a gang in secondary school, and was sent to the Singapore Girls' Home for stealing.

The tale of her eventful childhood and adolescence will be told in her memoir, *Jolene's Story*, to be launched at the Singapore Writers Festival in November. The book is published by Marshall Cavendish and the price has not been fixed yet.

Goh, who says she has always enjoyed reading and writing, says she started a blog in 2008 but updated it only intermittently.

She started working on a manuscript of her own life story last year, and at the encouragement of a few close friends, sent the first few chapters to several local publishers.

When Marshall Cavendish called back, she said her first thought was, "This cannot be true".

She signed a contract that gave her 10 per cent of all book sales and worked hard on completing the story.

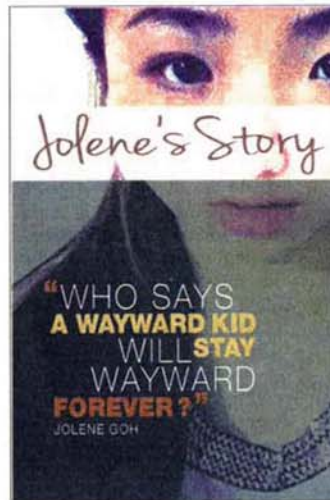
Now, at about 160 pages long, the slim volume provides a seldom-heard voice from Singapore's gritty underbelly, a class of people familiar with drugs, alcohol, debt, gang life and prisons.

Goh's biological father was a drug addict.

Her mother remarried when Jolene was five, and both of them moved in with her stepfather. She recalls being sexually abused by her stepfather, who had two sons with her mother. The couple is divorced now.

In Secondary 3, Goh joined the infamous 235 gang, taking drugs, spending the day drinking at coffeeshops and acquiring tattoos.

Often, she was depressed and contemplated suicide, mentioning that she once



"I cried through most of the writing... I had felt so alone during all that time. I hope that by sharing my experience, I can help others."

Jolene Goh (left) on writing her book, *Jolene's Story*

took more than 50 Panadol's at one time and even tried to slit her wrist - but did not dare to cut deep enough.

She was eventually sent to a girls' home for two years for stealing. Life in the girls home was colourful - she writes about the secret codes of behaviour and misbehaviour that goes on.

Goh, who passed her N Levels with an A1 for English and A2 for Chinese, said the writing process was "full of ups and downs".

"I cried through most of the writing," she said. "But looking at the outcome, I am very happy. I had felt so alone during all that time. I hope that by sharing my experience, I can help others."

Writing was therapeutic and she says "she has never felt more at peace".

She adds: "My friend told me, 'Don't treat your experiences as mistakes, but lessons'. Most people my age wouldn't have been through as much. And, touch wood, if anything bad happens to me, I can think to myself, I have been through much worse."

As for individuals named in the story being offended by her revelations - only her step-brothers have had their names changed - she says simply: "Since I'm ready to tell my story to the world, I must be prepared for negative feedback."

Her mother, Catherine Wee, 45, corroborates her account of events in the book and said she herself cried through most of it while reading it.

"I had been such a failed mother, a failed wife - my feelings were complicated while reading the book," said the helper at a hawker stall.

"I Whatsapped her to say 'I'm sorry'. She scolded me, 'Crazy ah, say sorry for what'," Ms Wee said.

Both of them are closer as a result of the book and are looking for a place of their own to live in. Currently, they are renting a room from a friend.

Goh, who quit her job as a sales executive recently, says she wants to study for a diploma in mass communications or start an F&B business.

She is also thinking of writing a book about young single mothers.

"I have more than 10 friends who are young mums, I feel like sharing their stories," she said. "Anyway, I don't think I will stop writing."