

Singapore Writers Festival



A long queue (right) formed at the Binary Pavilion at SMU on Sunday for Tongue Ties, Tongue Tied, a panel discussion on writing in two languages, featuring Alfian Sa'at, Chinese writers Guo Xiaolu and Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian. Readers (above) getting their books signed by Scottish poet Carol Ann Duffy and Singapore writer Professor Edwin Thumboo. ST PHOTOS: CHEW SENG KIM



Writers, readers all abuzz

This year's Singapore Writers Festival registered a record in ticket sales, with several events selling out

Akshita Nanda

Books flew off the shelves and book deals were inked at this year's Singapore Writers Festival, which ended on Sunday. It was a banner year in terms of attendance. Some 3,000 Festival Passes were sold, according to organisers, which is a significant increase from the roughly 2,300 sold at last year's festival.

The \$15 tickets granted access to most of the 200 events over the 10-day programme, which featured 200 authors.

Even separately ticketed events sold out, with 260 people attending workshops, such as one on writing fantasy conducted by Tracy and Laura Hickman, creators of the Dragonlance books, and one on researching historical fiction by heritage buff Kevin Tan.

Some 1,050 people paid \$15 to \$20 each to attend lectures given by visiting writers such as Nobel Literature Prize laureate Gao Xingjian, British philosopher A.C. Grayling and China-born Jung Chang, author of the best-selling memoir of the Cultural Revolution, *Wild Swans*.

Festival director Paul Tan, 42, said he was delighted by the turnout, even as more workshops and lectures had been added this year, in accordance with feedback.

"At the end of the day, this is a festival of ideas and a festival for readers. It is gratifying when we

succeed in connecting with these readers."

Headline events accessed by the Festival Pass were over-subscribed. Doors to the Binary Pavilion tent on the Singapore Management University green had to be left open to accommodate around 300 fans keen to hear Britain's poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy over the weekend. This led poet Alvin Pang, 41, to call for a larger venue next year. "Carol Ann Duffy could easily have filled venues twice the size," he said, adding that it would also be nice to have a small "green room" just for writers to meet and talk in between sessions.

It was also standing-room only at a panel featuring Gao, Chinese writer Guo Xiaolu and Singaporean poet-playwright Alfian Sa'at on Sunday as well as at the closing debate later that evening, which was free entry.

The irreverent comic battle between local literary lights was a highlight for many and this year's theme, *This House Computes That Singaporeans Are Illiterate Robots*, was defended by writers Shamini Flint and Gwee Li Sui and publisher Edmund Wee. Heritage expert Kevin Tan, actress Oniatia Effendi and street-food specialist K.F. Seetoh put forward opposing arguments, while playwright Eleanor Wong moderated.

Intimate reader-author dinners for 20 with Grayling and Duffy were fully booked before the festival opened as was the inaugural Literary Walk with writer Rosemary Lim. She took groups around places such as the Raffles Hotel, which inspired novelists such as Joseph Conrad and Somerset Maugham.

Many readers and writers commented on the vibrant atmosphere this year, compared with past editions. Teacher Nayantara Srinivasan, 22, who last attended the festival in 2009, came to Duffy's reading and last Saturday's publishing symposium, featuring leading editors and publishers such as Ravi

Mirchandani of independent British imprint Atlantic Books.

"I think it's really great this year. It has the sort of atmosphere that makes you want to spend the whole day at the festival," she said. "I love that I can attend something at the National Museum, then come down to the Festival Pavilion where they're selling cupcakes. How cool is that?"

Readers like her ravaged the shelves of the festival bookstore, operated this year for the first time by Popular Holdings. More than 6,000 books were sold over 10 days, according to a spokesman. Bestsellers included Jung Chang's new book, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, and the Ellie Belly series of children's books by Singapore writer Eliza Teoh.

A two-day publishing symposium held last Thursday and Friday also gave writers and publishers a chance to network. Singaporean author Isa Kamari, 53, saw interest in his novels from distributors in Europe and other Western territories, while Jacaranda Literary Agency's Jayapriya Vasudevan, 53, signed three new Singaporean writers.

She commented on the calibre of attendees this year: "It's getting better and better. The writers' pitches are amazing and the crowd a lot more fun."

Visiting British thriller writer Peter James, 65, was impressed by the youth and enthusiasm of the audience at his panels. "In England, there're just five little old ladies at the back of the hall. Here, they were very enthusiastic."

Among the visitors who will be returning next year is Straits Times reader Angela Soh, 44, who won a Festival Pass and dinner tickets to dine with Duffy in a contest organised by the newspaper. She went to Duffy's reading last Saturday, caught a screening of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* at The Arts House and was so charmed by her experiences that she will pay out of her own pocket for next year's festival. "They bring in interesting people. It is worth it," she said.

✉ akshitan@sph.com.sg

STAR
 Straits Times Appreciates Readers
 The Straits Times is the official media partner for the Singapore Writers Festival 2013