

# What next writers festival should have

It should deepen the conversation and host a lecture or retrospective of a major local writer



## Culture Vulture

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A festival of talking heads may not sound like the kind of thing to sweep Singaporeans off their feet, but one event has grown from strength to strength in spite of that basic format.

Three years after the hitherto free biennial Singapore Writers Festival became an annual ticketed affair with a festival director, it has become a highly anticipated and well-attended event on the arts calendar.

Like successful writers festivals such as the Edinburgh International Book Festival and the Hong Kong International Literary Festival, it has thrived by playing host to a wide range of authors and conversations that resonate with readers.

Since 2011, it has also taken a leaf from the book of the much larger Edinburgh festival in having a centralised outdoor

setting, in this case, white bubble tents set up for the duration of the festival on the lawn of the Singapore Management University.

Some events are also held in the nearby museums. This downtown location has worked well, particularly this year when the festival overlapped with the ongoing Singapore Biennale and drew spillover crowds from the museums.

The tents and museums were a perennial hive of activity during the festival from Nov 1 to 10, which featured 183 authors. More than 19,200 people attended free and ticketed events, up from 16,200 last year and 13,500 in 2011.

Among the highlights was a standing-room-only poetry reading by Britain's poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy, who read aloud to 300 listeners her forthright verse delving into issues of gender and social responsibility.

Another headline author, Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid, spoke of the manipulation of reality in novels such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and has been adapted into a film.

"The tension between the real and unreal excites me," he told a rapt audience of about 200 people, who later queued for 30 minutes to buy his books and have them autographed by him.

Then there was exiled Chinese author-turned-Francophile Gao Xingjian, the

inimitable Nobel literary laureate whose works not only cross cultures and languages but also genres.

An audience of 220 listened to the frail 73-year-old share his thoughts on translation and art-making. This was followed by a screening of the latest 2½-hour art film by the writer, painter and filmmaker, which demonstrated the uniqueness but also the intensity and impenetrability of his artistic vision.

Could it be that practical Singaporeans are now finally interested in not just art but also ideas? The writers festival parlayed that newfound interest into book sales and networking opportunities for Singapore writers.

A bumper collection of home-grown titles was launched at the event, which sold more than 6,000 books and hosted international publishers at a two-day publishing symposium.

Bouquets aside, where does the festival go from here? I would say that it needs to keep challenging itself and to work on little details that actually make a big difference.

Most of the festival takes the form of lectures and meet-the-author sessions that present a single writer, or panel discussions featuring three or four authors from different countries and cultures.

A knowledgeable moderator is vital in steering the discussion and can make or

break a lecture – unless of course, the author concerned has the charisma, eloquence and riveting backstories of Jung Chang. The bestselling China-born author and Cultural Revolution survivor had the audience eating out of her hand with her colourful tales of researching Mao Zedong and Empress Dowager Cixi.

From my understanding, moderators are given an honorarium of only a few hundred dollars. In most cases, translators are also not paid professional fees, even though professionals are needed to convey a non-English speaker's views accurately in a discussion and help him understand what is being said around him.

The moderator at Hamid's lecture, law professor and writer Simon Tay, drew flak from members of the audience for mixing up basic facts about Hamid's oeuvre and not being able to discuss the nuances in his writing. Perhaps someone more familiar with contemporary South Asian fiction should have been asked instead. Or perhaps the festival should pay more for moderators of headline events, given the amount of research involved.

I also sat through a one-hour panel on the writer's role in a country's intellectual life, where the translator for Chinese author Ma Jian was clearly out of her depth. Not only were his incisive views on China's politics lost on most of the Singapore audience, it was hard to get

any real dialogue going between him and the other three panelists, one of whom was a Korean writer with no translator whose English was largely unintelligible.

The alternative – ghettoising non-English-speaking writers in separate panels – is equally untenable. Perhaps, aside from raising standards of live translation, multilingual sessions should be extended to 1½ hours to factor in translating back and forth between languages.

This year, Singapore writers featured in one of the lectures, namely, lawyer and onetime writer Adrian Tan and literary critic and poet Gwee Li Sui.

However, unlike speakers at other lectures such as Hamid and Gao, Tan and Gwee were there not to talk about their own writings, but to analyse and debate two dystopian literary classics, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, in keeping with the festival's "utopia/dystopia" theme.

The festival should host a lecture on a Singapore writer. Every year, it hosts a tribute to a pioneer, but this could be expanded into a full retrospective with a lecture, reading, forum and exhibition.

Already, it has created buzz and discourse around the hardest of sells in this Internet era – writers talking about books. The next step is to deepen the conversation, across cultures and between the past and future.

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