

# 'Twisted coincidence' drove Malcom Seah to finish debut novel

Srinidhi Ragavendran

In the sterile quiet of a ward at Mount Alvernia Hospital, Malcom Seah found his way back to a story he had set aside.

The 24-year-old began writing his debut novel in 2021 during national service. He spent the first month sketching out characters and mapping the plot.

But it was not until his mother suffered a brain haemorrhage later that year that he returned to the manuscript with renewed urgency and clarity.

"My life just changed 180 degrees," says the economics and global Asia undergraduate at Singapore Management University.

"Even before it happened, I always knew the climax of the book would centre on the character Meredith's accident. I knew it would have something to do with the brain. But I hadn't quite figured it out. Then suddenly, my mum was in hospital because of a brain haemorrhage. It felt like a very twisted coincidence."

Initially hesitant to revisit the manuscript, Seah eventually turned to writing as a way to process the upheaval.

"The only way I knew how to cope was to channel everything into the story," he says.

Over the next three months, he wrote daily at his mother's bedside as she recovered.

"A major part of the book was written there," he says. The first draft took just two months to complete.

Four years and several revisions later, that early draft became *Swimming Lessons*, set to be released in Singapore on April 29 by Penguin Random House SEA.

The story follows an introspective Michelle, her comatose older sibling Meredith, and Michael, a rookie constable plagued by strange calls and mythic visions. It is an off-kilter blend of fantasy, coming-of-age and speculative fiction set in contemporary Singapore.

As their lives begin to intersect, each character must navigate grief, identity and the blurred lines between reality and the supernatural.

When asked what inspired him to write, Seah credits the period before enlistment when he spent hours browsing at Books Kinokuniya. American author Stephen King's *The Outsider* got him hooked on reading again.

"Eventually, I was reading one book a day," he recalls. "At some point, I was just very inspired to create my own stories because these writers had moved me in a way and I wanted to do the same

for others. That's when I really started writing."

He experimented with genres, from crime to sci-fi to fantasy – a search which eventually led him to *Swimming Lessons*.

"I feel like I really found my voice as a writer," he says. "I wasn't trying to impersonate anyone. This is something I can truly call original."

But the road from first draft to publication was far from smooth. After completing the novel, he submitted it to the Epigram Books Fiction Prize, where it made the

longlist in 2023.

However, subsequent submissions to publishers, including Penguin Random House, went unanswered.

It was not until late 2023, after he submitted a different manuscript, that things began to shift. Three months later, in February 2024, Penguin got back to him. Not about the new work, but *Swimming Lessons*.

"I looked through what I had sent and thought, 'This is horrific,'" he says with a laugh.

He asked for a week to revise the manuscript, while juggling school, an executive committee role in the Economics Intelligence Club, a business case competition and a full-time internship.

"I basically didn't sleep for a week. I rewrote the whole story from top to bottom," he says.

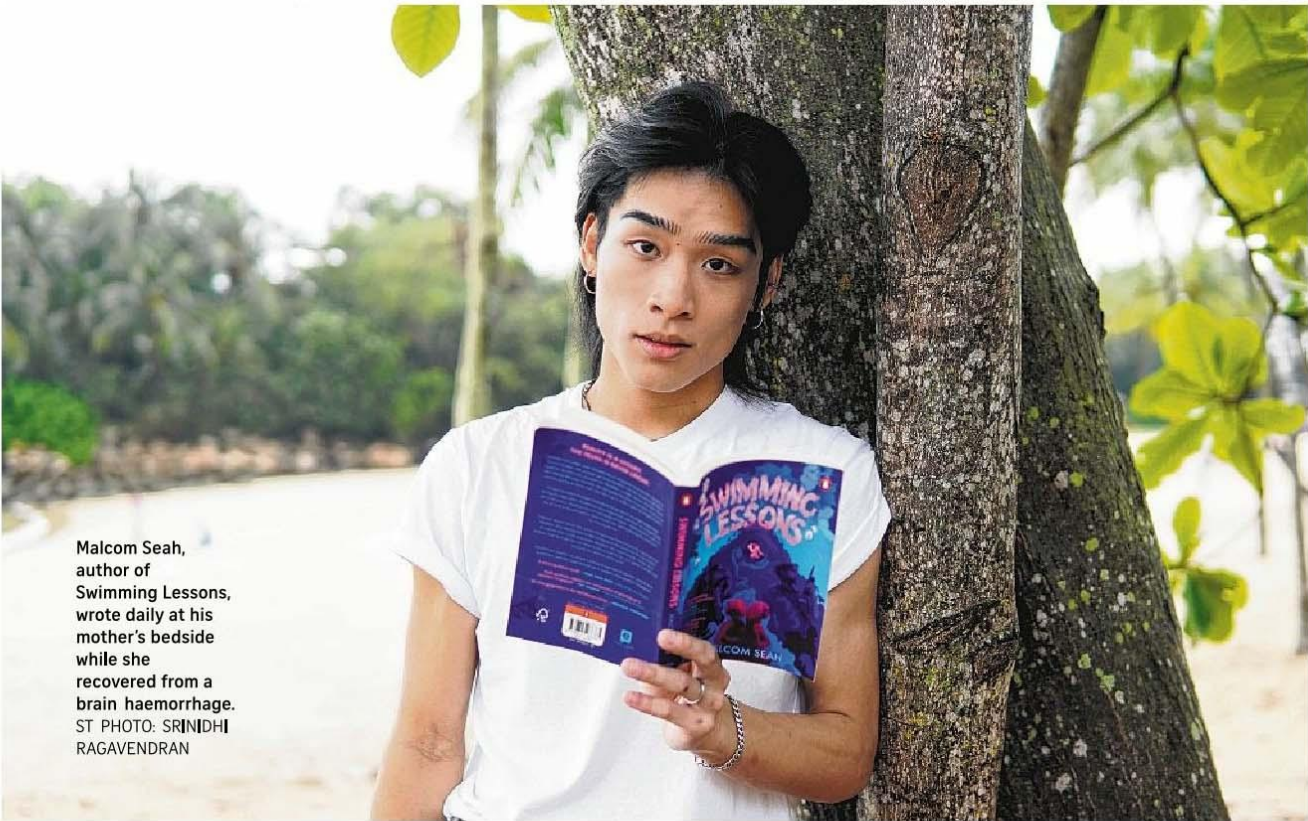
But the most difficult part throughout the process, he says, was not managing the deadlines.

"The hardest thing was trying to separate myself from the main character, Michelle."

He adds: "This is primarily about me, you know. And people think this book is about Michelle. The truth is, I don't know if I'm writing her story, or she's writing mine."

"That's perhaps the most interesting thing. I don't know if I'm the medium or if she's the medium for me."

• *Swimming Lessons* (\$24.90, Penguin Random House SEA) will be available at Books Kinokuniya, Book Bar, Littered With Books and Amazon Singapore.



Malcom Seah, author of *Swimming Lessons*, wrote daily at his mother's bedside while she recovered from a brain haemorrhage.  
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