NEW STRAITS TIMES

Not just for bookworms: How the Singapore Writers Festival 2023 has changed the game for readers and non-readers alike!

By Elena Koshy - December 10, 2023 @ 10:29am



The Festival opening debate. Photos courtesy of Arts House Limited.

LET'S face it. We need writers. AND books. Even when we think we can do without them. The idea that books (and to my greatest consternation, physical newspapers — but that's another sad story for another day) are slowly fading into oblivion.

Who reads these days? A recent study by Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia found that Malaysians read 20 books only a year, a slight improvement from the 2014 record of 15 per year.

I think the lack of reading has lasting repercussions.

There's a saying that goes: A nation that doesn't read much doesn't know much. And a nation that doesn't know much is more likely to make poor choices in the home, the marketplace, the jury box, and the voting booth. And those decisions ultimately affect the entire nation... the literate and illiterate.

It's worrying and sad.

Books and writers are essential to our society as they serve as vessels and creators of knowledge, culture, and imagination. Writers capture and convey human experiences, thoughts, and emotions, crafting stories and ideas that educate, entertain, and inspire.

The resurgence of reading is crucial, and it's vital to honour the people who fuel this journey — our writers. Books are indispensable, and even more so are the writers who unlock the vast realm of possibilities, shaping our perception of the world. They're

inseparable; a book is incomplete without the writer's vision, just as a writer's thoughts find their true purpose in the pages of a book.

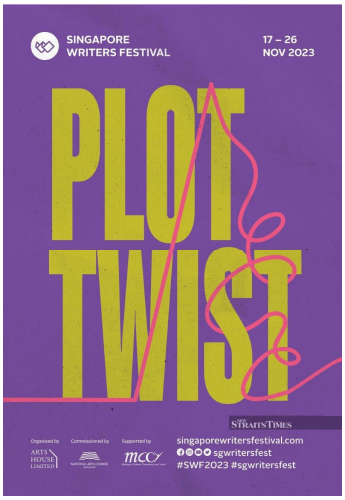
The recently concluded Singapore Writers Festival (SWF) provided an insight into how to rekindle the fading spark of reading into a flame that would broaden its reach and impact.

I admit, initially, I felt somewhat daunted by the idea of such festivals. "What am I going to do there?" I wondered out aloud. The concept of a writers' festival seemed exclusive, almost as if it was a space solely for literary elite, leaving little room for others, much less a reader who loves paperback thrillers and enjoys the occasional romance book or two!

Organised by Arts House Limited (AHL) and commissioned by the National Arts Council (NAC), the SWF 2023 — in its 26th iteration — was designed to cater to a wide range of interests, and it certainly caught my attention.

The theme for the year, "Plot Twist", immediately piqued my interest. As a fan of thrillers and a lover of plot twists in all forms, this theme resonated with me. I found myself wondering, would SWF provide that element of surprise and excitement I was eagerly looking for?

INTRIGUING INTRODUCTION



From the moment my name was flashed out as soon as I stepped into the arrival hall, I knew I was in for an interesting adventure. This personalised welcome set the tone for what promised to be an engaging and memorable experience.

I wasn't disappointed. This was no ordinary festival. The atmosphere was inclusive, with everyone, regardless of their literary background, coexisting harmoniously.

You didn't need to be a literary connoisseur to enjoy the festivities. This is, after all, a "Plot Twist" where the journey takes a different path and unexpected outcomes are, well, expected!

SWF offered an exhilarating experience with around 200 events, both free and ticketed, catering to a wide array of interests. Festival-goers were treated to an unconventional line-up, including a series celebrating the 50th anniversary of Hip Hop, events centred around combat sports, punk rock sessions, and even immersive walking tours.

The 10-day festival celebrated key figures in Singapore's literary world, including the late Goh Poh Seng as this year's Literary Pioneer. A poet, dramatist and novelist, Goh was one of the original architects of the arts and culture scene in Singapore.

He's also credited as being the first writer to introduce Singlish to the stage with his play, *When the Smiles are Done*. His first novel *If We Dream Too Long* won the inaugural National Book Development Council of Singapore Award for Fiction (known as the Singapore Literature Prize today) and is considered by many to be the first English-language Singaporean novel.

The festival also offered a range of activities for writers, readers and literature fans, including debates, workshops, talks, book launches and performances.

It dawned on me that SWF wasn't limited to just books and authors. Instead, it encompassed an astonishingly wide range of topics. The workshops, sessions and events featured an eclectic mix of subjects, including food, science fiction, love stories, and history. There was also a focus on music, technology, and even combat sports!

"A literary festival cannot be a mere collection of writers who want to talk about their own books and drive sales. Not in these times we find ourselves in. It seems crucial that a literary festival happening in the now is cognisant of how it functions as a response to the time and place it happens in," said Pooja Nansi, SWF festival director.

SWF, she insists, isn't just a gathering of some of the most important writers, thinkers and artists we have in a singular space. "It must allow an opportunity to really sit with deeper questions about who we are and what we can leave behind for a better future with our brief time on this planet. A literary festival should also allow space to experience joy in listening to and learning from each other."



Viet Thanh Nguyen book signing.

Who would've thought that a writer's festival could celebrate so many different forms of art and literature? It felt celebratory with the pounding music and scores of young people milling around the Arts House and the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall.

Additionally, the festival featured sold-out programmes headlined by renowned international authors, including academic and activist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Pulitzer prize-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen, further highlighting its diverse and inclusive appeal.

MALAYSIAN TOUCH



Captive audience.

The festival's Malaysian influence was unmistakable and delightfully evident from the outset. The opening event was a lively, thought-provoking debate humorously titled "This House believes AI is the better writer".

It turned into a playful yet insightful tussle between technology and human creativity, almost like a quirky showdown between silicon chips and ink pens.

The debate, revolving around artificial intelligence's (AI) potential to rival human imagination, perfectly echoed the festival's "Plot Twist" theme. Adding a humorous twist, the debate's finale featured ChatGPT as the proposition's closing speaker, blending AI with a dash of irony.

Moderating this engaging session was Malaysian author Shamini Flint, whose self-deprecating joke as the "token Malaysian" for the night had the audience in stitches.

The humour continued with poet Melizarani T. Selva, the second "token Malaysian", who lent her voice for the House. Their witty and spirited contributions added a layer of charm and laughter to the debate, making it a standout event at the festival.

Despite the event being infused with humour, it also sparked serious contemplation, especially with the inclusion of ChatGPT in the discussion about the writing community.

The debate raised poignant questions about the future of writing in the age of advanced technology. Can writers truly be supplanted by machines? In that hall filled with writers, readers and lovers of literature, the answer was a resounding no!

I only wish that there were more discussions on this subject, given the fact that ChatGPT is such a hot topic. Can writers co-exist with technology? Perhaps we need to talk about this more.



Festival keynote talk by Lat.

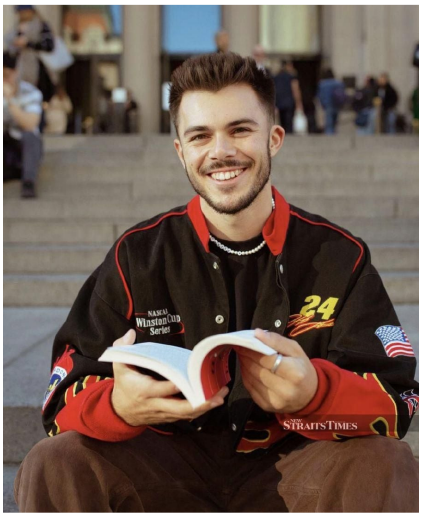
This year's festival was graced by the presence of several remarkable Malaysians contributing their unique talents and perspectives. Among them was the esteemed cartoonist Datuk Mohd Nor Khalid, affectionately known as Lat, whose work is

celebrated far and wide. Joining him were Fasyali Fadzly, Lee Su Kim, K. Balamurugan, and Fabian Fom, each bringing their own flair to the event.

Saras Manickam, Huzir Sulaiman, Shamaine Othman, Hafizzul Hashim and Lauren Ho also participated, adding to the diverse tapestry of Malaysian talent showcased at the festival.

Their involvement not only highlighted the rich literary and artistic heritage of Malaysia, but also contributed significantly to the vibrant and dynamic atmosphere of the event.

LITERARY ADVENTURE



Jack Edwards, Internet librarian.

It was an amazing journey through the three days I was there at the SWF. I met the Internet's most famous resident librarian, Jack Edwards. Imagine that! Edward's totally on point with his witty, super relatable book reviews that have taken Youtube and TikTok by storm.

Need a book recommendation that'll make you cry buckets? He's your go-to guy. Wondering if the latest hyped book is actually worth the read? Trust him to spill the real tea!

Edward's session was a hit, drawing in a crowd of young, enthusiastic students who have clearly been following him on social media. It's incredible to see how this young influencer has reignited a passion for reading among his audience through his captivating videos.

In his talk, Edwards shared his journey with eloquence, diving into his experiences as a student, a Booktuber, and a true book enthusiast. His story is a testament to the idea

that the world of literature is vast and welcoming, offering a niche for every kind of reader.



Talking about Southeast Asian sauces!

The festival also had a delightful culinary dimension. At the session "Small Plates, Big Flavour: Our Side of Sauce-East Asia", chefs and food influencers came together to celebrate and discuss the significance of sauces in Southeast Asian cuisine.

The enthusiasm for sauces in this region is palpable. People passionately debate over the finest homemade chilli and even use sambal belacan as a symbol of friendship and diplomatic ties.

It's hard not to be enamoured with the topic of sauces, especially when they're such an integral part of our culinary traditions. And yes, the vivid descriptions of food were so enticing they could easily leave anyone feeling a bit peckish!

The festival grounds buzzed with the vibrant rhythms of hip-hop, creating an electrifying atmosphere. On the lawn, people lounged on bean bags or gathered around a stage where an exciting fusion was taking place.

The session, titled "We Never Thought Hip Hop Would Take It This Far", had five writers teaming up with a live DJ, creating a dynamic blend of spoken word and iconic hip-hop tracks from legends like Dre, Tupac, and Eminem.



Revealing The Kebaya — Past, Present, Future, and Beyond.

At the SWF, the variety of sessions and programmes was astounding, with so many options that some even overlapped, ensuring there was something for every attendee. Interested in the history of the kebaya or keen on a discussion about sustainable fashion? These topics and more were covered.

Reflecting Singapore's multicultural diversity, the festival offered sessions in multiple languages including Mandarin, Tamil and Malay. This linguistic diversity not only catered to the varied audience, but also enriched the festival experience, showcasing the rich tapestry of cultures and perspectives present in Southeast Asia.



SWF 2023 festival bookstore — Closetful of Books.

The question of whether books will become obsolete remains open. While there are concerns about the future of physical books, events like the SWF demonstrate a continued interest in reading. For instance, I found myself purchasing several books at the festival, influenced by the recommendations from Denise Tan of Closetful of Books.

However, I've learnt that literature can and do extend beyond just physical books. SWF highlighted that our engagement with literature isn't limited to the traditional format of printed pages.

In this digital age, literature can take on new forms and reach audiences through various mediums, suggesting a dynamic and evolving future for the world of reading and storytelling.

So, I for one, will choose to remain dry-eyed and optimistic. Books may (or may not) be dying, but thanks to festivals like SWF, the stories themselves — those unruly creatures we trapped in paper and pixels, the narratives that delight and dismay and define us — are still very much alive.