

Singapore Writers' Festival



Writer Yeo Wei Wei (above) speaking to a senior citizen at Swami Home for the Singapore Writers Festival's Passages project, and writer Han Han (top left). PHOTOS: SINGAPORE WRITERS FESTIVAL, ST FILE, YONG SHU HOONG

Unspoken tales for festival

Writers interviewed people on fringes of society to tell stories in Passages project.

Akshita Nanda

For three years, Singaporean writers met senior citizens, low-income families and former prisoners and wrote stories inspired by these conversations for the annual Singapore Writers Festival.

The stories that evolved from the project from 2011 to this year appeared in online literary journal Quarterly Literary Review Singapore and print journal Ceriph.

This year, 12 of these stories will be published in print for the first time, in the anthology *Passages: Stories Of Unspoken Journeys*.

They can also be read for free on the Singapore Writers Festival's official website.

Festival director Paul Tan, 42, who decided on the social groups and organisations the writers would interact with, says: "There is recent American research which shows that reading literary fiction builds social empathy. So as readers navigate the authentic settings and figure out the complex human relationships within the stories, I hope they will also get a better understanding of a Singapore they may not be so familiar with."

"But whether stories really build empathy or not, the fiction in *Passages* are great stories to begin with and we hope Singaporeans enjoy them."

The book is fully funded by the Singapore Writers Festival and National Arts Council. It is printed by Ethos Books and retails at \$22 without GST at major bookstores. Sales proceeds will be donated to The Straits Times' School Pocket Money Fund.

Writers featured include Stephanie Ye, Yeo Wei Wei, Kristina Tom, O Thiam Chin, Wong Shu Yun, Jeremy Tiang, Quek Shin Yi, Marc Nair and Dave Chua, whose stories are in English. A Malay story by Noor Hasnah Adam, one in Tamil by S. Anparasan and a work in Chinese by Han Han are included in the original language and English translation.

The works written between 2011 and this year were chosen for literary merit and also to complement the theme of the title, according to the book's editor Yong



Writers featured in *Passages* (left) include (from top) Marc Nair, Stephanie Ye and O Thiam Chin.

Shu Hoong, 46, who led the project from 2011 to this year. "I like the social angle of the project, how it brings writers into contact with segments of population in Singapore whose life experiences are seldom in the spotlight," he says.

In 2011, eight writers visited senior citizens in their homes or at HCA Hospice Care and Sunshine Welfare Action Mission (Swami) Home.

Last year, another eight writers spoke with members of low-income families,

introduced by Beyond Social Services, Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres and The Little Arts Academy.

This year, eight different authors spoke to former prisoners re-entering society, with the help of the Singapore After-Care Association.

Securing the interviews was the toughest part. Yong says: "I didn't manage to get the interest of the first few organisations I had approached, as they were probably wary about the nature of the project, even though I had assured them that the stories are fiction and not journalistic accounts of senior citizens or people stuck under the poverty line."

"I had to ensure writers remain sensitive, while assuring the partner organisations that we were trying to lend voice to the underprivileged to get their stories told and not exploit them or betray any accorded trust."

The experience was an eye-opener for poet Nair, 32, whose story *Soon* is loosely based on a conversation he had with a former drug offender – coincidentally the same person writer Chua met.

"We both got very different things out of it," says Nair and indeed his story is blackly comic, while Chua's *The Zoo-keeper* is poignant.

Listening to the former drug dealer's history was "like watching a movie", Nair says. "I was intrigued by his stories of drug wars. There's this whole raw underbelly we don't know about. Our streaming system is very good at isolating large portions of Singaporeans from each other."

Though he prefers verse and is launching a new collection *Postal Code*, under Red Wheelbarrow Books, at the Singapore Writers Festival on Nov 4, the *Passages* project is inspiring him to consider prose.

"I would like to write a book of short stories now. There are so many stories to tell," he says.

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To read all the *Passages* stories online, go to www.singaporewritersfestival.com/year-round-programmes/passages

Book it

PASSAGES: UNSPOKEN JOURNEYS

What: Writers featured in this year's *Passages* project will speak about their experience, after which writers who took part last year and in 2011 join in to launch the print anthology *Passages: Stories Of Unspoken Journeys*
Where: The Salon at National Museum
When: Nov 10, 11.30am
Admission: Free