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COVER STORY

Chronicles of Malaysiana

Evanna Ramly



Bookshops play a role in shaping a country's literary heritage

A- A A+

Malaysian literature boasts a rich history, from early epics influenced by the Mahabharata and Ramayana to the wonderfully descriptive prose of Hikayat Mara Karma, Hikayat Panca Tanderan and Hikayat Gul Bakawali. National laureates like Datuk Shahnnon Ahmad, Datuk A. Samad Said and Datuk Zurinah Hassan, with their vivid depictions of local culture, have brought us much pride and paved the way for the next generation of prolific writers.

However, with the proliferation of pulp fiction as well as self-publishing, where do Malaysian writers and the publishing industry stand in the modern literary world?

“When I talk about publishing, I’m talking about culture,” says Raman Krishnan, founder of independent bookseller and publisher, Silverfish Books. “I’m talking about serious books about Malaysian culture – a cultural commodity.”

Raman laments how Malaysians are too busy arguing to be concerned about this aspect of their culture. “Malaysia tends to downgrade culture to tourism. Books are part of the Malaysian culture but they cannot understand that – or don’t want to understand it.”

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Then there is the issue of sponsorship from private companies. "When I first started 18 years ago, I used to get sponsorship for some of my books from HSBC, Australian High Commission and other bodies. Now, it depends on who's in office. The private sector doesn't look at it from the branding point of view. Some companies are aware but the economy is not good these days."

Indeed, he feels that the biggest problem is the rising cost of living in the past year. "The ringgit has fallen and GST has pushed up the cost. As a result, the publishing industry is very badly affected. Not just the literary industry but also the non-literary segment."

He recalls a time when shopping malls were full of bookshops. "Most of them have closed down so we've got nowhere to sell our books. If I publish a book, where am I going to sell it? It's fortunate that I have my own bookshop, but not everyone has that advantage."

Raman, however, admits that the situation hasn't always been like this. "There was a time when the government was not too preoccupied to bring back our book companies," he says, citing the 2002 reclamation of Malaysia Publishing House (MPH) from Singapore. "During Mahathir's time, MPH was the jewel in our crown. Its image was fantastic, synonymous with intellectualism."

He worries for the survival of the local publishing industry. "Some have taken to diversification. Some sell merchandise, some sell stationery, but Silverfish Books has resisted that because we're known as a serious bookshop. We want to hang on to that."



From left: Raman focuses on Malaysian writers to promote local culture, Amir foresees a trend of small companies set up for niche markets and Hanna believes it is vital for both Malaysian readers and writers to be more courageous

The bookshop diversifies in other ways, by conducting writing workshops and offering editorial expertise. "We're now trying to venture into contract publishing. What we want to do is provide good quality publishing for corporate leaders. We will do the research and interviews, edit to world standard and publish a book they're not going to be embarrassed about."

While he is not judgemental about those who self-publish, there are problems with such an avenue. "The works are not edited or proofed. Bad paper is also being used. We can provide twice the quality for half the cost. We can even talk to the writers to fine-tune their work."

As far as the government is concerned, Raman believes that there is much more that can be done. "We can have an arts house which is not partial with a focus on arts. That's what any advanced country is all about – having a vibrant arts scene and a vibrant publishing scene."

Everyone knows that Malaysia boasts a rich culture. "Since Silverfish specialises in Malaysian books, a lot of people have asked me if there's enough material to write about. They also wonder if most of my customers are expats. My customers are young Malaysians and they are a curious bunch. Malaysians want to know about Malaysians. There's a hunger for local stories."

When asked why he only publishes books by Malaysians, Raman says he wouldn't have it any other way. "I suppose I feel a certain pride in doing it. Every publisher has its own niche and ours is to promote Malaysian culture."

There is something to be said about the role of a bookshop owner in shaping the country's culture and literary heritage. "We don't just sell books. We see ourselves selling culture and knowledge, a historical snapshot of us."

Moreover, books and culture offer an incredible export opportunity. "Other people also want to know about our culture and our writers. I go to Frankfurt every year and the biggest buyers now are from Europe, China, Japan and Korea. One of our books, *The Sum of Our Follies* by Shih-li Kow has been translated into Italian and will be available as a French edition soon. That's how you spread your culture to other countries."

Commerce vs art

For writer Amir Muhammad, who is also the founder of independent publisher Fixi, the most pressing issue would be securing payments from recalcitrant bookstores and wholesalers. Money, he observes, also plays a key role in the sort of books most local publishers typically commission. "It depends on what they specialise in. It would be what they think would sell well, to regular consumers, to schools or to libraries."

On the growth of local writers, Amir is positive. "More people are writing than ever before, even if only for their circle of friends. Although most do not see it as a career path, this is not an issue. There should be greater variety when it comes to genres and even languages, but

this can only happen when there is consumer or institutional demand.”

He foresees there will be more small companies set up for niche target markets. “People will also explore more online options for sales and distribution, and find other ways, such as sponsored content available for free, to make money from writing, instead of the traditional retail model.”

Hanna Alkaf, author of the narrative nonfiction *Gila: A Journey Through Moods & Madness* as well as an upcoming historical novel, *The Weight of Our Sky*, ponders the subject from multiple perspectives.

“As a reader, for me, the biggest issue is being able to find local works that boast a certain quality and skill in storytelling, editing and production. Books that aren’t riddled with typos and grammatical errors; are well designed and as much a feast for the eyes as the mind. I want to be confident that a locally produced book will meet a certain baseline of quality as one produced in the US or the UK,” she says.

The challenge is greater when writing in English. “As someone who writes in English, I’m also competing against international titles for attention. A book is a big commitment on the part of the reader – a commitment of time, money, attention and brain matter. If the expectation of quality isn’t met to satisfaction, why should the readers part with their hard-earned money for my books when they could get one from a more well-known author?”

Still, Hanna believes it is imperative for both readers and writers to be braver. “We should not be so easily satisfied. Being ‘good enough’ is not enough; we need to demand more of and for ourselves. Readers need to push for better stories and better books from local writers. As writers, we need to push ourselves to meet, and then exceed those demands.”

She admits how tempting it can be to rush through the process. “Read and research more, study the art of writing and the work of those who do it well so that we can take those lessons to heart and be the writer that readers want and deserve.”

From her experience, she finds that local writers are hungry for opportunities and success. “Just by seeing the community at work in the Malaysian Writers Community Facebook group, you know that there is a passionate, driven group of writers trying to better their craft. That’s largely why the Malaysian Writers Society was officially set up this year, to help channel and shape that passion and to champion the banner of local writers. Hopefully, this can help us move forward.”

She continues: “What we need now are more chances to prove ourselves, more avenues to get our work out there, more support from the powers that be. Where are the government-backed national writing awards or literary prizes for local works published in English? Where are the grants that can help us grow or at least support ourselves while we hone our craft?”

The truth is, she says, publishing is a business at the end of the day. “The only way it can grow is if it has the money to do it.”

Finances would also provide greater support such as that enjoyed by writers living overseas. “They consist of resources that are not as readily available, or just more costly, locally such as creative writing classes, books on writing, literary magazines, awards and festivals, as well as events that allow you to network with agents and editors.”

But perhaps the most important support is that of the Malaysian readers. “Have a little faith that local writers can write the stories you want to read. Trust us with your time and attention. Tell us what we’ve done wrong by leaving constructive criticisms on Goodreads. And just as importantly – and because we need the boost sometimes – what we’ve done right,” Hanna surmises.

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