

## **How to talk about Malaysian novels in English without reading any**

### **Going Global 2004 – 2014: Building a Readership for Local Novels**

*Tenth of ten weekly articles by Chuah Guat Eng, published on 6 October 2015*

In my previous article, I made the observation that until around 2010, most of the new home-based novels published were heritage novels set in colonial times. After that year, such novels continued to be written by diaspora writers; but on the local scene, they began to disappear, to be replaced mainly by genre or pulp fiction (e.g. crime thrillers). If you remember, I then cited Fixi Novo's Manifesto which states quite starkly that they specialise in pulp fiction, and have no interest in publishing "your grandmother's World War 2 stories".

That quoted statement drew some spirited responses from a number of my readers. One suggested that the writer of the Manifesto was being "snarky" about the prize-winning diaspora novels of Rani Manicka, Tash Aw, and Tan Twan Eng (all of which deal partly or wholly with the Japanese Occupation), and wanted to know if local publishers and Malaysians in general were resentful of diaspora writers. Another wanted to understand the reasons for the preference for genre fiction, and wondered if the local MNE can still be considered "literature".

I can't answer for Fixi Novo, of course, and I don't intend to. But I thought I would try to address some of the issues raised in these questions in a general way while examining – and celebrating – local efforts to build a readership for the MNE, which is the real purpose of this article.

The idea that local publishers and Malaysians in general are resentful of diaspora writers is easily demolished. First, most Malaysians I've spoken to don't make a distinction between local and diaspora MNEs. I, for one, divide them into categories in these articles only because my intention is to provide statistical data for analysis.

Secondly, as I pointed out in the previous article, local publishers (including Fixi Novo) have published a number of MNEs by diaspora and expatriate writers in recent years. And they have promoted these novels, alongside local novels, at major international book trade events such as the Frankfurt Book Fair.

Thirdly, no discrimination is made in readership-building activities by government institutions. Through the years, local universities have continued to create national and international awareness of both local and diaspora MNEs through scholarly journals and international conferences. And the National Library of Malaysia has unfailingly nominated both diaspora and local MNEs for the Dublin/IMPAC Literary Award ever since 2005, when the library first took part.

The reasons for the preference for genre fiction are more difficult to pin down. The reason given by Fixi Novo is: “because crime, horror, sci-fi and so on turn us on”. But since other publishers who do not acknowledge a similar reading taste were also publishing genre fiction during this period, there must be other reasons.

One possibility is that it makes marketing sense, since it has been established by several studies of the local book industry that English-literate Malaysians have a preference for imported pulp fiction. However, whether readers who like imported pulp will readily switch their allegiance to local pulp is hard to say. Novels aren’t like bags of salt; they don’t all taste the same.

The other possibility is found in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. One of the aims of the Blueprint is to close the urban-rural gap in English Language proficiency, and one of the recommended methods is the development of a reading-for-pleasure culture among the young. This might explain why, from about 2013 onward, we find publishers such as Lejen, Jemariseni, Poket Press and Terfaktab Media entering the MNE scene with romantic fantasies and other forms of light reading aimed primarily at the young adult reader.

However, government policies and marketing aims are one thing; the realities of the marketplace are another. The reality is that the flood of imported books supplied by book importers, distributors, and retailers to cater to the tastes of the largest and most lucrative market segment – the urban, English-educated middle class – leaves little room for local MNEs to make their presence felt in mainstream outlets. As a result, MNE publishers and writers have had to resort to alternative channels for expanding their market.

Unlike older generations of MNE writers, who tended to sit in splendid isolation in their ivory towers, the younger generation of writers, publishers, and writer-publishers are more inclined toward readership-building activities that are collaborative and community-oriented. They frequently work with one another, and with other creative arts communities to

organise and curate art and literary events to promote their books. Among the more established and regular events are the Art for Grabs/KLAB (Kuala Lumpur Alternative Bookfest) and the Georgetown Literary Festival in Penang. Nowadays, art and literary festivals have become so fashionable that hardly a month goes by without one going on in one of the cities or larger urban centres, not only in Peninsular Malaysia but also in Sabah and Sarawak.

Increasingly, such endeavours are being supported by mainstream English-language newspapers, periodicals, radio stations, and university literature departments – perhaps because many of those who work in these establishments are themselves engaged in one form or another of creative writing. A particularly encouraging sign and cause for celebration is that several book discussion groups dedicated to or emphasising MNEs have recently been formed by literary-minded members of the public in major town centres and on the Internet.

Finally, can a local MNE written in the genre fiction mode still be considered as “literature”? It all depends on the novel itself. After all, what makes a novel literary isn’t its genre; it’s what the novelist does with his or her chosen genre.

And, alas, the only way to answer that question is to read the novel.