

New talents

Three writers longlisted for Singapore's richest literary prize will have their novels published



Lee Jian Xuan

The publisher behind Singapore's richest literary award, the Epigram Books Fiction Prize, will publish another three titles off its longlist, on top of the four shortlisted titles that it has already brought out.

The three books are: undergraduate Daryl Qilin Yam's *Kappa Quartet*, a work of speculative fiction that features the kappa, a water spirit in traditional Japanese folklore; undergraduate Kevin Martens Wong's *Altered Straits*, in which merlions are deployed as machines to fight wars; and *Annabelle Thong*, a chick-lit novel by Imran Hashim, a senior liaison manager at the University of Warwick.

Epigram Books' founder Edmund Wee tells *The Sunday Times* that his team had initially narrowed the 69 submissions they received for last year's prize to a longlist of about 10 entries.

Four titles were shortlisted and the \$20,000 first prize eventually went to author O Thiam Chin, for his novel set in a tsunami-ravaged Thai town, *Now That It's Over*.

Mr Wee says: "We looked at the list again and chose these entries as we felt they were good enough to be published."

Annabelle Thong will hit the shelves in August, while *Kappa Quartet* is set to launch in September at the Singapore Writers Festival. *Altered Straits* is expected in bookstores early next year.

For Imran, 41, the publication is the end of a nine-year journey. He had started work on the first draft while he was furthering his studies in Paris.

He says: "I often e-mailed friends back home to update them about my life. These were well received and a few friends told me I should compile my e-mails into a book. I stupidly took up their advice. It may come across as hee-hee-ha-ha, but it's the hardest thing I've done."

His book is named after its titular character, a 28-year-old Catholic teacher who moves to Paris in search of love, makes new friends and starts to find her belief system challenged by the people she meets and the French way of life.

"The novel focuses on values we are obsessed with as a nation: the pursuit of excellence, social status, material success, law and order. It then explores what happens when these come up against ideals such as egalitarianism, fraternity, revolution. How do we reach out to people who are deeply different

from us?" he asks.

Imran says the title was partially derived from Annabel Chong, the stage name of the former Singaporean pornography actress Grace Quek.

He adds: "I'm fascinated with her – as an iconoclast, she's powerful and unforgettable. If you're writing humour fiction, why wouldn't you call your devoutly Catholic heroine Annabelle Thong?"

Yam and Wong's books both deal with mythical creatures.

Yam's story involves a kappa's chance encounter with a Singaporean holidaying in Tokyo and expands to include more characters, all with their quirks and who grapple with loneliness.

The 25-year-old drew on a diverse range of influences, from anime series to works by writers such as Haruki Murakami and David Mitchell. It also helped that he spent a year in Japan under an exchange programme by the University of Warwick, where he studies English literature and creative writing.

Yam, who will return to Singapore next month to work for the literary non-profit collective Sing Lit Station, says: "I knew that *Kappa Quartet* was a strange novel, so when I submitted the manuscript, I knew it was a gamble."

"The day I was informed it didn't make the shortlist, it was heart-breaking. So it's an incredible validation that Epigram is willing to publish my work."

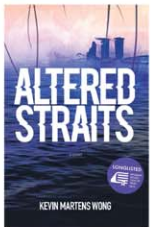
Wong's story came about when he entered a short story in a creative writing competition at the National University of Singapore, where he is studying linguistics.

The 23-year-old says: "One of the judges, Ann Ang, told me it was excellent and I should get it published. It happened that the Epigram prize was announced then, so I thought, hey, why not give this a shot."

Altered Straits ties together the stories of two protagonists living in different times. The first, Naufal Jazair, is born into a fictional Singapore, where the Sultan expelled the British in 1824, and is drafted into the military where he has to fight in a war alongside creatures such as merlions and garudas (large mythical birds). The other is Titus Ang, a military officer living in a distant dystopian future where Singapore is the last fortress standing against a monstrous hive mind entity that has enslaved the world. The stories were borne out of Wong's experiences while he was doing national service.

He says: "The main question was always how far I would go to protect the people I love in a time of war. Sure, I could do horrible things if I had to and if the country's safety and my loved ones were at stake, but could I live with myself after that? After writing this story, I'm not sure I have good answers."

Mr Wee is heartened by the success of the first two shortlisted books released – both Sebastian Sim's *Let's Give It Up For Gimme*



Kevin Martens Wong's (left) *Altered Straits* ties together the stories of two protagonists living in different times. PHOTO: MINDY TAN FOR EPIGRAM BOOKS

Lao! and Wong Souk Yee's *Death of A Perm Sec* have sold out their first print-run of 1,000 copies and have entered a second run.

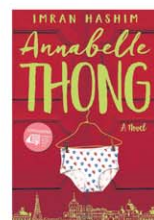
The other two short-listed books, O's prize-winning *Now That It's Over* and Balli Kaur Jaswal's *Sugarbread*, are out in bookshops.

While the competition has yet to receive any submissions this year, Mr Wee is already looking into raising the prize money this year, so that shortlisted finalists also receive a monetary award for their work.

He says: "I hope the prize sparks a desire in people to write and submit their stories. We want them to know: Even if you don't win, you can get your work published. For some people, that's enough of an incentive."

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• The Epigram Books Fiction Prize is open for entries till Sept 1. For details, go to ebfp.epigrambooks.sg



Imran Hashim's chick-lit novel is about a Catholic teacher who goes to Paris in search of love. PHOTO: IMRAN HASHIM



Daryl Qilin Yam's *Kappa Quartet* features a water spirit in Japanese folklore. PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK