

\$50k NUS prize for inspiring story on Singapore history

Fiction and non-fiction titles with local historical theme eligible for global competition

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The life of a coolie, the history of food production or even the story of the first telegraph that was transmitted from Singapore's Fort Canning Hill to London in 1871.

These are some examples of books that could be written about Singapore's history which the nominating committee of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) History Prize is looking out for.

The prize, now in its second run, is open to the rest of the world and welcomes fictional works as well as non-fiction titles with a historical theme.

The publication must be analyti-

cal, critical and challenging in its content.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani, who first mooted the award and is part of the jury panel, told *The Straits Times*: "A lot of records of Singapore's colonial period are still in Calcutta (now Kolkata), Chennai and London.

"If someone goes there and does research and produces a book, that also qualifies for the prize too."

The prize will be awarded in 2021 for works published from January 2017 to November next year.

The organisers noted that it is an "open global competition" because Singapore is of interest, not just to Singaporeans but elsewhere, as the island has always been at the crossroads of history.

Prof Kishore noted that the \$50,000 award makes it one of the most generous history prizes in the world. The cash award for winning a Pulitzer is US\$15,000 (S\$20,740).

The NUS history prize money comes from a \$500,000 donation from an anonymous donor in 2014.

HISTORY EVERYWHERE

Every aspect of life has a history and these are often the aspects that are more important to us than just political and diplomatic history. We want to inspire people by introducing the nuances and complexities of Singapore history to non-academic audiences.



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR IAN GORDON,
head of the NUS history department, on
inspiring people.

The money has been placed in an endowment fund to finance an award every three years.

The donation followed an April 2014 *Straits Times* column by Prof Kishore – now senior adviser at the NUS Office of the vice-president for university and global relations – where he described Singapore as having an outstanding history but lacking an outstanding history book.

The goal since then has been to stimulate engagement with Singapore's history and produce good historical works, he noted.

Prof Kishore added that Singapore has many fascinating institutions that could stimulate an author, from Singapore Airlines to the port of Singapore.

He said the prize will hopefully incentivise writers to switch from turning out coffee table books to history publications.

The inaugural prize winner last year was Professor John Miksic of the NUS Department of South-east Asian Studies, an archaeologist, for

his *Singapore And The Silk Road Of The Sea, 1300-1800*. The book provides detailed archaeological evidence that Singapore's story began more than 700 years ago.

However, the submissions do not have to be monolithic and expansive in nature like the first winning publication and they do not have to be about the "big men" of history either, said Associate Professor Ian Gordon, head of the NUS history department.

He noted: "Every aspect of life has a history and these are often the aspects that are more important to us than just political and diplomatic history."

"We want to inspire people by introducing the nuances and complexities of Singapore history to non-academic audiences."

He hopes young Singaporeans will try for the prize, noting that more are interested in the subject. For instance, over the period from last year to date, the history department experienced a 5 per cent growth in students taking its modules.

He said: "History is not a dry subject. There are such a myriad of topics out there to mine because Singapore has been the node of an international network – so much has passed through Singapore and so much has been shaped by Singapore."

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• For more information about the NUS History Prize, visit:
<https://nus.edu/2RSeemk>