

Changing society through eco books



Eating Chilli Crab In The Anthropocene (left), a new essay collection edited by Yale-NUS College assistant professor of environmental studies Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (above), features pieces by young writers such as Fu Xiyao (above right) and Yogesh Tulsi (right). PHOTOS: COURTESY OF FU XIYAO, DIYA KUNDU, ETHOS BOOKS, JURIA TORAMAE



VIEW IT / BOOK LAUNCH: EATING CHILLI CRAB IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

WHERE: Facebook

WHEN: Saturday, 3pm

ADMISSION: Free, from www.eventbrite.sg

INFO: www.facebook.com/ethosbooks



Singapore-based Canadian writer Darryl Whetter's new novel, *Our Sands*, set in the tar sands of Alberta, Canada, is a Romeo-and-Juliet-esque tale of two idealistic young ecological saboteurs.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF DARRYL WHETTER, PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE SEA

Look at local subjects through an environmental perspective and read a love story set amid Canada's destructive oil operations

Olivia Ho
Arts Correspondent

What does chilli crab have to do with the climate crisis? One might well wonder when confronted with a title like *Eating Chilli Crab In The Anthropocene*, a new essay collection in which the cultural intersects with the environmental.

In its pages, 13 authors take unlikely local subjects and fashion from them fresh environmental perspectives, whether it is reframing the nation's beloved otters as environmental refugees, or the irony of using imaginary tigers in branding

for beer and bubble tea while real tigers have been hunted to extinction here.

The anthropocene, or the "epoch of humans", is a term used to describe the human-centric world, one marked by climate change and other catastrophes such as deforestation, extinction and plastic pollution.

Yale-NUS College assistant professor of environmental studies Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, the book's editor, says: "Part of the goal of this book is to help Singaporeans think about the ways in which this thing we call 'the environment' isn't distant and irrelevant to their daily lives, but something that they're already deeply entangled with in a million ways, something they have a massive stake in."

"I suspect that this book will open a lot of readers' eyes."

In the title essay, Neo Xiaoyun muses – while digging into that culinary classic, chilli crab – about the role food plays in constructing a national heritage, and the ecological cost of heightened crab consumption.

Standing on the bund enclosing

Semakau Landfill, Fu Xiyao digs up its history as the home of indigenous islanders who were displaced in the 1990s to clear space for the waste dump.

Yogesh Tulsi holds up an "oily mirror" to Singapore's dependence on fossil fuels in an analysis of films about the orang minyak, a rapacious supernatural being from Malay folklore who is covered in black grease. This is "petro-horror", argues Tulsi, the haunting of the kampung by a monstrous representation of modernity's ills.

All the book's authors are in their 20s, which Prof Schneider-Mayerson, 38, says was an intentional effort.

"Many young people, in Singapore and around the world, are recognising that if we don't take appropriate action immediately, they will lose the opportunity to enjoy the decent future they were promised."

"More young people seem to understand the scale of what's happening, in a way that seems more difficult for people my age and older. But young people are frequently marginalised in general

discourse, policy-making and politics."

But he adds: "I think readers will find that the book is unique, illuminating and engaging, regardless of the authors' ages."

While there exist academic books and articles on local environmental history and governance, he has found no book, non-fiction or academic, that focuses on environmental issues in contemporary Singapore.

"A book like this can help us understand the way that these global forces, challenges and questions apply to the place we call home."

For Singapore-based Canadian writer Darryl Whetter, environmental despair at his home country drove him to set his new novel, *Our Sands*, in the tar sands of Alberta, Canada, which *The National Geographic* has called "the world's most destructive oil operation".

Whetter, 49, who helms the creative writing master's programme at Lasalle College of the Arts, spent eight years writing the novel, a Romeo-and-Juliet-esque tale of two idealistic young "ecoteurs", or

ecological saboteurs.

Ocean Janak, 17, has been raised in a life of privilege thanks to her oil executive father, but falls for Rory McAllister, a bike courier who is also a guerilla activist.

As a student in Ontario, Whetter protested against the building of a massive garbage incinerator in nearby Toronto and later lobbied for paper recycling in university.

He believes fiction can change society by making people care. "We read stats about the environment and other social issues differently than we read a story that moves us."

The Covid-19 pandemic, he says, has been hard on the environment. "I myself spent two fearful weeks using a tissue every time I touched an elevator button. Beaches are now choked with discarded masks."

More than that, the focus on the coronavirus is likely to overshadow urgent climate-change debate.

"We do need to acknowledge the connections between Covid-19 and the climate," says Prof Schneider-Mayerson. "Scientists note that the emergence and spread of zoonotic viruses such as Covid-19 are linked

to deforestation and other stressors on wildlife, which are also major contributors to climate change.

"We need to understand that the ongoing pandemic is a window into what a future with runaway climatic destabilisation might be like. And we need to view this pandemic, terrible as it is, as a once-in-a-century opportunity for a necessary transformation."

"The pandemic gives us the opportunity to imagine and enact the kinds of changes that would have seemed unrealistic or impossible just six months ago. Whether we take advantage of this opportunity remains to be seen."

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• *Eating Chilli Crab In The Anthropocene* (\$25) is available for pre-order at bit.ly/EatingCC_MSM. *Our Sands* (\$27.71) is available at bit.ly/OurSandsDW.

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