

Book Nook

Author Teo Xue Shen wrote four books on his phone

Elisa Chia

Like most national servicemen, Teo Xue Shen would be on his mobile phone whenever there was a break. Unlike most, however, he was not browsing social media or gaming, but writing a novel.

By the end of national service, he had completed about four manuscripts on his Sony phone.

Two of these were published after they were longlisted for the Epigram Books Fiction Prize, the only award in Singapore for unpublished English-language novels.

The first, *18 Walls*, was written during Teo's basic military training and specialist cadet course.

Longlisted for the annual prize in 2017 and published in 2018, the story centres around a group of elite soldiers fighting a half-animal, half-human species.

Last year, Teo was longlisted

again for another sci-fi action thriller, *Children Of The Ark*, which he wrote mostly during a bilateral exercise in Australia during NS.

The book, which has just been released, is set in a dystopian Singapore. In it, an 18-year-old girl is tasked by an underground organisation to save a group of children who are shunned by society because of their special abilities.

Teo enjoys writing stories which reflect his own experiences or explore themes he feels should be discussed, such as racism.

He says writing is his hobby and that he set himself one rule during NS.

"No matter what, I absolutely had to write something every day," he tells *The Straits Times*. "On good days, I could manage 10 to 20 pages, while on bad days, one or two words."

At 19, Teo became the youngest person to be longlisted for the Epigram Books Fiction Prize. Now 22, he is in the second year of a four-year environmental studies honours degree at the National University of Singapore.

Asked whether he had excelled in English at school, Teo says he did "fine", adding: "English is a subjective language to grade and there were definitely teachers who did not like my writing style. On one occasion, a teacher accused me of plagiarism as my piece was too 'scholarly' to have been written by me."

He first tried writing novels while in junior college at Hwa Chong Institution.

The alumnus of Ai Tong Primary School started reading non-fiction books about the ocean and marine life when he was a child. "Gradually, I did come to enjoy fiction and would read 16 to 24 books a week during school holidays."

Teo advises young students to focus on learning vocabulary and grammar. "These will carry on being useful even when you're no longer studying English as a language."

• *Children Of The Ark* (\$18.90) and *18 Walls* (\$16.90) are available at epigrambookshop.sg

• This is part of a series where experts give tips on how to get kids to love reading.

WHAT TO READ WITH YOUR CHILD

Teo Xue Shen recommends these books.



MY FAMILY AND OTHER ANIMALS

By Gerald Durrell
Puffin/Paperback/\$17.55/
Available at Books Kinokuniya

"This book follows the young author as he moves with his family to Greece. His fascination with wildlife and tendency to bring them home with him results in hilarious confrontations with his eccentric family members who, very obviously, do not share his love of nature.

"Descriptions in this novel are especially vivid and this is where I learnt how to vary my narrations of various scenarios, so they would not seem repetitive or boring."



THE GATEKEEPER

By Nuraliah Norasis
Epigram Books/
Paperback/\$26.64/
Available at Books Kinokuniya

"Ria is a young Medusa who turns her village to stone using her gaze. She then flees to an underground city where she acts as a gatekeeper for the world's marginalised creatures.

"Years later, she meets a man, Eedric, and their relationship threatens to shake up the very foundations of their lives and the world around them.

"This book is set in a fictional version of Singapore, and contains themes such as racial marginalisation and the rich-poor divide.

"This was where I first saw the integration of Malay and English into one piece of writing. It was impressively done and intrigued me, as I had often wondered about how appropriate Singlish would be in a novel about Singapore."

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