



Historian Wang Gungwu won for his memoir *Home Is Where We Are*, which spans 20 years and begins with his time at the University of Malaya, while literary pioneer Suratman Markasan won for his essay collection *Mengasah Kalam Jilid 2 (Honing The Pen Volume 2)*. PHOTOS: LIANHE ZAOBAO, MARCELLIN LOPEZ

Historian, literary pioneer bag S'pore Literature Prize at 91

Wang Gungwu, Suratman Markasan are among 12 winners in different categories

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Historian Wang Gungwu and literary pioneer Suratman Markasan, both 91, have become the oldest people to win the Singapore

Literature Prize.

Wang's memoir *Home Is Where We Are* and Suratman's essay collection *Mengasah Kalam Jilid 2 (Honing The Pen Volume 2)* respectively topped the English and Malay creative non-fiction categories this year.

They broke a record previously

held by Chin Kah Chong, who was 85 when his Chinese creative non-fiction work, *LKY Whom I Knew*, won in 2016.

The winners of what is Singapore's oldest ongoing literary prize in all four official languages were announced in a ceremony at Victoria Theatre yesterday.

Home Is Where We Are, which spans 20 years and begins with Wang's time at the University of Malaya, is the second part of his memoirs. He wrote it with his wife

Margaret Wang, who died before the book was launched.

"She didn't live long enough to see the book appear, so I'm very sad about that," said Wang, who is known for his research on Chinese history.

He said his wife would have been delighted by the win, adding: "I am very surprised. All my life I have been writing non-fiction. But no

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49 works shortlisted across 12 categories

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one described it as creative.”

This year, 49 works were shortlisted across 12 categories – fiction, poetry and creative non-fiction in Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil.

Yeow Kai Chai, former director of the Singapore Writers Festival, came tops in the English poetry category with *One To The Dark Tower Comes*.

The 54-year-old said: “I know my poetry is not commercial, or not the most mainstream, not the most literal.

“But I think the scene is changing, and there’s more appetite for differ-

ent ways of approaching poetry. I didn’t expect to win at all... I think there are more listeners now.”

Meanwhile, New York-based poet Jee Leong Koh won the English fiction category for *Snow At 5pm: Translations Of An Insignificant Japanese Poet*, a hybrid of haiku and prose.

Speaking over the phone, the 52-year-old, whose poetry collection *Connor & Seal* was also shortlisted, said: “Being awarded this prize has given me great encouragement that such hybrid works could receive recognition, and that there’s certainly a place for such works to push the boundaries of what we know.

“Certainly, I could not have written *Snow At 5pm* without having made my life in New York City. For me it is less a global novel and more a love poem in some way to New York City.”

He plans to donate his winnings to the Transformative Justice Collective, an organisation dedicated to reforming Singapore’s criminal punishment system.

Wang, Suratman, Koh and Yeow are all first-time winners.

Yeow’s book, published in 2020, was his first poetry collection in about 15 years. It follows from his earlier volume, *Pretend I’m Not Here* (2006).

The Singapore Literature Prize,

established in 1992, is a biennial award organised by the Singapore Book Council (SBC). The 12 winners each received \$3,000 as well as a trophy and a gift code to audiobook platform Storytel.

Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong, who was guest of honour, also presented literary pioneer Edwin Thumboo with an SBC Achievement Award.

The Readers’ Favourite awards, determined by public vote – 4,464 votes in total – went to Ali Salim, Daryl Qilin Yam, Pan Cheng Lui and Rama Suresh, who won \$1,000 each.

There were 35 judges this year, including novelist Balli Kaur Jaswal, poet Yong Shu Hoong, and National Library Board assistant chief executive Gene Tan.

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