

Indian author Kiran Desai (left) at her book signing during the Singapore Writers Festival last month. PHOTO: SINGAPORE WRITERS FESTIVAL



Literary festivals can amaze and disappoint

From Ubud to Singapore and George Town, the year-end sees a host of literary festivals in the region. But are such festivals really good for readers?

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For The Straits Times

While Singapore may not really have seasons save, as the joke goes, hot and hotter and wet and wetter, literature lovers in and around the country certainly think of the festival season.

Bali's picturesque Ubud Writers and Readers Festival kicks things off in late October before the marathon Singapore Writers Festival (SWF) of early November; then it's the vibrant George Town Literary Festival later that month.

Attendance at the three dedicated literary festivals in the region has been growing steadily, with record crowds this year at SWF (26,500), Ubud (25,000) and George Town (just under 6,000). As the rising attendance numbers attest, all this literary activity is undeniably exciting. However, are literary festivals really good for readers and writers?

For a start, festivals are recent

phenomena. English writer Martin Amis opens his latest collection of essays, *The Rub Of Time*, by describing how in 1972, his first novel was published "and that was that. There were... no panels, no onstage conversations, no Woodstocks of the Mind in Hay-on-Wye, in Toledo, in Mantova, in Parati, in Caragena, in Jaipur, in Dubai".

Festivals run the risk of making the writer more important than the reader. Are we letting writers tell us how to read? Commercially, we're still seeing the massive disintermediating impact of the network paradigm, as workers, from travel agents to lawyers, risk being displaced by online services selling everything from discount hotel rooms to do-it-yourself divorces. With the simple printed book, we have to, in the English language, think back 400 years to remember its disruptions, not the just 20 or 25 for the Web.

Media theorist Neil Postman's book *Television And The Teaching Of English* documents how many more schoolhouses, teachers and

other educational infrastructure were required once students had to learn how to read, not just speak. Reading may be taught in school and have public intersections, from libraries to bookstores to literary festivals, but reading remains fundamentally private. In one of the more personal passages of Alberto Manguel's *History Of Reading*, he recounts how powerful it was when he realised that it was when he realised that however profoundly he was moved as he sat reading across the room from his parents, they couldn't know what words, and worlds, were scrolling through his mind.

I'm old enough to remember when video-cassette recorders were radical technology, when movies shifted from something you went out in public to experience to something you can enjoy in your sitting room.

That shift from the public nature of drama, such as Greek tragedies and Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, to the privacy of a book is arguably part of the DNA of the novel. Literary scholar Ian Watt's *The Rise Of The Novel* describes the Victorian novel

as a genre of the middle class, by the middle class for the middle class. That middle class, we should remember, were in part the middle class because they could read. They did so alone, with novels and magazines travelling easily by post and sparing someone having to travel to urban centres and theatres.

While literary festivals can be amazing when a writer confirms or is even better than our expectations, like this year's scamp David Sedaris at the Singapore Writers Festival, it can also be disappointing to meet our literary heroes. I am among the scores of admirers of Richard Ford's first two Frank Bascombe novels, *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*. We fans thought it a fitting extension of Bascombe's existential lassitude that he gives up being a writer to become a content real-estate agent. Imagine my disappointment when I heard Ford, who was undeniably charismatic on stage, with his raptor's piercing eyes, explain his character's shift as just something easy to portray for a writer who had "bought a lot of

houses over the years". I remain with D.H. Lawrence: "Trust the tale, not the teller."

Still, growing festival attendance suggests a hunger to consider the writer alongside the written, and a yearning among readers to seek a form of community.

The Ubud Writers and Readers Festival is the two-handed, Balinese thank-you from the heart. In a verdant object lesson of love conquering hate, the festival was conceived by Janet DeNeeffe in 2004 as a response to the first terrorist bombing in Bali. Ubud quickly grew to attract Booker Prize winners like Michael Ondaatje and Richard Flanagan.

Amid 200-plus events, this year's headliner was Hanif Kureishi, whose 1990 debut novel *The Buddha Of Suburbia* remains a post-colonial clarion call. In his on-stage interview, Kureishi offered this valentine to the arts: "I think of culture as a form of inspiration, of showing people what you love about the world."

Many Straits Times readers will know that the Singapore Writers Festival is the marathon of literary festivals. At nine days, it is longer than neighbouring Ubud and George Town combined. The myriad events in the old Parliament House building, with its lingering armrest hardware for simultaneous translation in four languages, make SWF very Singaporean.

Discounting Monaco's two-day Book Fair, a mere trailer compared to the epic movie of SWF, literary festivals are usually municipal, not national. There is no single national literary festival in the United States, the United Kingdom or Australia. SWF combines urban centrality with national funding to create one of the most vibrant festivals in the world.

Another unique aspect of SWF is its combination of an evolving but largely recurring list of local writers, myself blessedly included, with visiting international stars like Simon Armitage, Junot Diaz and Sedaris. Diehard Sing Lit fans get a rare chance to see how the same authors adapt and evolve from year to year. What new jokes, delivered to every corner of the room, will incoming festival director Pojja Nansi improvise? My personal SWF highlight this year was moderating a tri-school reading with students from Nanyang Technological University, Yale-NUS College and Lasalle College of the Arts, including our debut novelist Seema Punwani and Chen Cuifen, who was at the time just two weeks shy of winning the UK's £2,000 (S\$3,470) Troubadour International Poetry Prize.

With the season of literary festivals finally at a close, my literary plan for early 2019 is to leave my suitcase in the closet. Instead, I'll just sit silently in my study, reading and writing the books that make me both alone and never alone.

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