

Rumours of a literary uprising in Singapore are true

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Having recently drawn 211 people out to Lasalle College of the Arts for a packed evening talk on the power of metaphor in writing, I'm more confident than ever that the rumours are true: The literary scene in Singapore is truly exploding.

Ever since I arrived in early August to direct Singapore's first taught creative writing master's degree at Lasalle, everyone I've met in the arts has told me that the national literary scene, while never idle, has really taken off in the past five to seven years. When I'm not working on my next novel or planning the graduate writing workshops for our first January semester, I'm out at literary events with Singapore's writers, publishers, educators and arts administrators. Everyone agrees that the literary scene here appears to have reached critical mass.

Even a newcomer like myself can spot the uptake in literary productivity and influence. The Epigram Books Fiction Prize has doubled its prize money to a total purse of \$40,000, and the prize was created only last year. I recently attended the launch of SG Poems 2015-2016, the National Poetry Festival's first anthology of poetry.

What's so exciting for me as a writer and writing professor is to see how all this activity is driven by a combination of individual creativity, government arts support and private enterprise. Visit the passionate Mr Kenny Leck at his store, Books Actually, and the book seller/publisher can point to several of his Math Paper Press poetry titles that are in their third or fourth printing of a thousand copies each. My native Canada manages to have the world's richest poetry prize in English – the C\$65,000 (\$67,000) Griffin Poetry Prize – yet it's hard to sell 1,000 copies of a book of poems there.

Every literature lover I know has a warm spot in his heart for San Francisco's City Lights Bookstore. My wife and I were delighted to stop there on our move here from Canada. City Lights is great, but a lot of its value is now nostalgic. Books Actually and Math Paper Press are to Singapore now what City Lights was to the exploding American literary scene 60 years ago.

The Singapore Writers Festival has grown from a biennial event to one of the most popular literary festivals in the world. There's no difference between its author line-up and those of festivals in New York, London, Toronto or Sydney. Singaporean poets like Chris Mooney-Singh are able to secure the National Arts Council's support

for programmes as diverse as teaching secondary school students to write and perform slam poetry and running the annual writing tutorial programme, Mentor Access Project. In just a few years, peer editing group, The Singapore Writers Group, went from forming to self-publishing an anthology of its writing to being published by Ethos Books and featured at the Ubud Writers Festival.

Artists are always in dialogue with their culture. Creative writing, particularly at the postgraduate level, is one of the rare growth areas in the arts and humanities. In the US, the number of postgraduate writing programmes doubled between 1985 and 2005. In Canada, there was a new creative writing master's launched every other year throughout the 2000s. Australia's even more active. It has just about two-thirds of Canada's population but nearly 10 times as many PhD programmes in creative writing. Singapore is more than ready for a master's degree in creative writing.

There are several advantages to doing a master's degree in creative writing, both for the individual writer and for his culture. First and foremost, it accelerates a writer's development. No one thinks you can learn to weld, scuba-dive or make clothes without being taught. I'm baffled that people still cling to this romantic notion that writing

cannot be taught. Creative writing now thrives on the workshop model. Rather than lecturing at a student for three hours, we demonstrate techniques and concerns but also invite students to constructively critique one another's work. Several of my students over the years have uttered the same praise for workshopping: "It's easier to spot mistakes in someone else's work than it is in your own."

Also, crucially, students inspire one another. There's always a crystallising moment somewhere on either side of Project Week when students start writing in ways they never anticipated while simultaneously challenging one another to keep raising the bar.

Several of our graduates will work as editors in the publishing sector precisely because our programme forces them to articulate why one piece of writing is better than another. There's a great moment in *Captain Fantastic*, a movie from this summer in which Viggo Mortensen plays a demanding, counter-cultural father. His homeschooling of his children includes a ban on the word "interesting" when it comes to analysing books. Why, this character and creative writing degrees want to know, is one book better than another?

American writer Paul Theroux

taught in Singapore from 1968 to 1971 (at what became the National University of Singapore) and subsequently set his 1973 novel *Saint Jack* here. His much later memoir, *Sir Vidia's Shadow*, is a diptych portrait of two writers: Theroux and his former mentor V.S. Naipaul. A young Theroux asks Naipaul if he should bother to continue publishing book reviews when it means his fellow writers will sometimes hate him. "Yes," Naipaul replies, "reviews force you to make judgments." A good creative writing degree improves the analytical sensibilities of writers through editing as well as their powers of observation, language skill and social-emotional intelligence in their own fiction, poetry, drama or non-fiction.

Singapore's fecund literary scene, combined with the chance to teach postgraduate creative writing students at a renowned art school, was enough to tempt me to come here from halfway around the world. In my 16 years of university teaching at four different Canadian universities, including as the creative writing coordinator at Halifax's esteemed Dalhousie University, I've always quoted different writers on the value of surprise in writing. Robert Frost argues, "No surprise for the writer; no surprise for the reader." Eudora Welty is even more blunt: "If you

haven't surprised yourself, you haven't written." Moving here to be the inaugural director of Singapore and South-east Asia's first taught creative writing master's programme has that kind of understandable-only-in-hindsight kind of surprise for me. I'm elated to be at an art school. Even in famous writing programmes in the US and Britain, student and faculty writers are usually isolated from other campus artists. At Lasalle, we pass one another every day. Every storyteller can learn from an actor. Visual artists have so much to offer our poets and screenwriters. Elsewhere, a school with a great writing programme might have a much larger programme in business, dentistry or engineering overshadowing the artists and performers. At Lasalle, everyone is here for the arts. Everyone.

It's surely a coincidence, but tattoos in Singapore seem to also have taken off in popularity during this same time. The ink is certainly flowing well in Singapore.

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