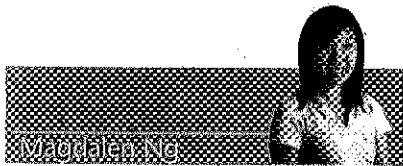


Writing bestsellers

Judging by sales, children's books are a lucrative field and more Singapore writers are making their mark in it



The book industry for little people in Singapore is big. Many authors here are writing books for children and going by the sales figures, it is no wonder.

Children's books by writers here sell much better than local adult novels.

Take, for example, the Mr Midnight series of illustrated horror stories by James Lee. The series has sold more than two million copies in Singapore alone, and is now on its 62nd book. Each edition contains two horror stories and costs \$6.31.

Authors typically receive about 10 per cent royalty of the book's cover price. While it is not known what the royalties are for Mr Midnight, the earnings are clearly not child's play.

Other children's book successes, although on a smaller scale, are by authors such as Adeline Foo, whose two-book Diary Of Amos Lee, which chronicles the daily life of the adolescent Amos, has sold about 40,000 copies here.

And Singapore-based Malaysian Shamini Flint's Sasha series of 13 books, which follows the inquisitive Sasha on her adventures to countries such as Singapore, Indonesia and India, has sold more than 150,000 copies worldwide, including Hong Kong, China and Australia.

In The Straits Times bestsellers list, which compiles sales figures from major bookstores weekly, Mr Midnight and Amos Lee feature consistently. However, it is rare to find a local fiction book making the adults' list, alongside popular international authors such as Jodi Picoult and James Patterson.

A spokesman for MPH, Singapore's biggest book retailer, says: "Children's books usually do the best for most bookstores."

"Given a monthly household budget, parents are more likely to invest in educational toys and books."

While parents are more willing to spend on their children, the young ones are also more willing to give new and unknown authors "a chance".

Flint says: "It's much easier to decide whether you like a picture book once you leaf through the pages and look at the illustrations. When it comes to a novel, it doesn't work that way. For Singaporeans, who don't read much, they would rather go for bestsellers such as Dan Brown's books."

Homemaker Christine Fu, who was at Books Kinokuniya at Ngee Ann City in Orchard Road with her six-year-old daughter, Xinni, says: "Other than the newspapers, I don't read much at all. But I know that reading is good for my kid, so I buy her about one new book a week."

The 34-year-old adds: "When it comes to spending on educating my kid, I don't think twice. So long as she likes the book and is willing to read it, I am willing to pay."

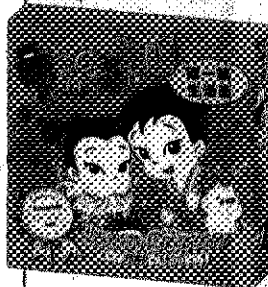
Parents are also attracted to the Asian context that local authors write about. In fact, looking for suitable books was what made former radio DJ Petrina Kow produce her set of Taoshu Learn Chinese readers.

First-time authors who write children's books are also given a hand by the First Time Writers and Illustrators Publishing Initiative. Authors are invited to submit their entries each year and the winning entries are published. It is a joint initiative by the Media Development Authority and the National Book Development Council of Singapore.

Mr Kenneth Yeo, the Media Development Authority's director of films, animation and publishing, says: "We launched the initiative because through our interaction with the industry and feedback from several interest groups, we realised that there are many talented writers and illustrators looking for an opportunity to publish their maiden works."

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Ex-DJ's learn Chinese books



When former DJ Petrina Kow (above) was looking for Chinese story books for her daughter Victoria and could not find anything suitable, she decided to write them herself.

"There were some books with text that even I could not read. How could I teach my daughter then?" says the 34-year-old.

"And there were others with pictures that were so ugly," she adds with mock

exasperated husband Blossom Warrior! This r... animatic draw from The r... Learn Ch... Each : sales figu... Kow s... one to... provided

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The initiative has kickstarted the careers of Foo and Lee Jin Pyn, who won an award for her illustrated book, *The Elephant And The Tree*.

Mr R. Ramachandran, executive director of the National Book Development Council of Singapore, thinks there are many adult novel authors who would publish their works if given a chance.

"There are many manuscripts floating around. It's not that people are not writing. No one is picking them up to be published," he says.

Otto Fong, a former science teacher at Raffles Institution, who has published comic books targeted at teens, hopes to be able to write for adults in the future.

The 42-year-old says: "Perhaps it's a matter of maturing and developing as an author. When you first start writing, you don't have that maturity to produce a book for adults, because you do not have that much to tell."

Still, perhaps authors are drawn to writing children's books because they are much easier to produce.

Mr Edmund Wee, 58, owner of home-grown publishing house Epigram, which has done books such as Foo's *Diary Of Amos Lee*, says: "A picture book is only, what, about 20 pages? And half the work is done by someone else if you don't illustrate the book yourself.

"Compare that to a full-length novel which is at least 100 pages long and requires extensive research. How many people can afford to write full-time?"

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