

Growing (old) pains

Singapore writers spoke to people in old folks' home and under hospice care to get inspiration for stories

akshita nanda

In a short story project for the upcoming Singapore Writers Festival, some writers confronted their own fears about their twilight years.

The PasSAGES project organised by the National Arts Council took eight local writers, including critically acclaimed poet Aaron Lee and award-winning Tamil writer Jayanthi Sankar, to an old folks' home and to meet terminally ill patients living in their own homes under hospice care. The idea was to generate new stories in Chinese, English, Malay or Tamil based on the writers' experiences.

On a visit to the Sunshine Welfare Action Mission home in Sembawang, writer Yeo Wei Wei began thinking about how she might cope with old age. The 38-year-old has two pet dogs and could empathise with elderly residents who had to give up their animal companions.

"I'm part of an ageing population and I don't have children," says Yeo, publications director at the National Art Gallery. "I always wonder what will happen to me when I'm older and have no one to take care of me. Where would the dogs go if I were in a home?"

She channelled her thoughts into *Here Comes The Sun*, the tale of an old woman and her beloved dog. Her story and the seven contributed by the other writers are now available at the online literary journal *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*. They will be uploaded on Saturday to the Singapore Writers Festival website, along with English translations of stories written in Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

The Writers Festival, sponsored by Singapore Press Holdings and SPH Foundation, runs from Saturday to Oct 30 and showcases bestselling authors including Steven Levitt of *Freakonomics* fame and critics' darling Michael Chabon.

"We wanted a part of the festival to create content as well," says festival director Paul Tan, 40. "We have a lot of events and thought one or two could give writers inspiration for future works."

Hoping to highlight a social cause dear to his heart, as well as to introduce writers to people they would not normally encounter, he came up with the idea for

PasSAGES. The title stands for both the passage of life and the idea that the elderly have much to share.

The decision to send writers to the home for the elderly in Sembawang and to meet patients assisted by local charity HCA Hospice care was deliberate, says Mr Tan. "Hospices and old age homes don't get as much attention as children's charities."

Participating writers included Heng Siok Tian, Stephanie Ye and O Thiam Chin, who, along with Lee and Yeo, contributed works in English. Essayist Noor Hasnah Adam crafted fiction in Malay, poet Chiu Wei Li in Chinese, and Sankar in Tamil.

They submitted their stories last month and will speak more about the inspiration behind the tales at a Writers Festival event on Oct 30.

Lee, 39, says of his time visiting the old folks' home in Sembawang: "It was an eye-opener to see people whom society puff in one corner. It's inevitable, it's not very nice to admit there are people who slip through the cracks in society."

He was intrigued by one resident, a former gambler, who said that his addiction drove away his family. At the other end of the spectrum was the tale of a patient under hospice care, whose flat he later visited. The terminally ill woman, who is in her 70s, is "dearly loved" by her daughter, also her caregiver.

"If you do not invest in relationships, you can end up at the end of your life alone," says Lee, whose story, *Righteous Rain*, explores family ties.

Writer Sankar, 47, took a similar tack. Her story *Axe Oil*, or *Kodari Thailam*, explores what might happen if the traditional caregiver relationship between grown child and aged parent breaks down.

The mother of two boys aged 23 and 19 says her visits with the elderly have inspired her with ideas for years to come. They have also prodded her to look into volunteering.

"Literature is one of the few ways to increase social awareness," she says.

HCA Hospice Care's manager of community relations Emma Goh, 29, says that it is therapeutic for patients to share their stories and "leave behind a sort of legacy".

She points to the case of O Thiam Chin's story of a woman caring for her dying husband, *You Are Always Here, All The Time*. The real-life caregiver it was based on wept on reading it.

It does not matter that the stories from the PasSAGES project were not strictly factual, she says. "Patients have a story to tell, and writers, whether by means of autobiographical accounts or fiction, help all of us understand the human condition a little more through their words."

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Singapore poet Heng Siok Tian with Mr Low Bak Meng, who is under HCA Hospice Care's Day Hospice programme. PHOTO: YONG SHU HOONG

2 days to Singapore Writers Festival



Stories from the PasSAGES project can be read online at the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* (www.qlrs.com) or from Saturday at the festival website www.singaporewritersfestival.com.

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PASSAGES UNWOUND

Where: Learning Gallery, Singapore Art Museum @ 8Q
When: Oct 30, 3.30pm
Admission: Free
Info: Go to www.singaporewritersfestival.com