So many authors, so few readers

Aspiring authors sprout freely. But many have to resort to self-publishing

AUTHOR Harris Ng wants to dispel myths about schizophrenia. Emily Tai wants to wean Singaporeans off junk food. And Low Kay Hwa just loves to write.

So what do they do with all that pent-up research and emotion? They write a book. And they publish it themselves.

Ng, 58, forked out $8,000 to publish his autobiography, Recovered Grace, while Low, 20, paid $2,340 to put out his love story, I Believe You. They have sold about half of their first print-run.

Tai, 49, a former nurse-turned-housewife, has plonked $20,000 of her savings into 5,000 copies of Will Your Child Eat A Tomato?

The recipe book, aimed at helping parents coax children to eat fruit and vegetables, was released in January and has sold only 220 copies so far.

While every author believes he or she can give JK Rowling a run for the money, the reality is that most of these books will wind up in the bargain bin, if they are lucky enough to get into a bookstore in the first place.

Many writers underestimate the complexities of getting published. It is not just about writing a compelling book, but about convincing a publisher to take it on, a bookstore to carry it, and getting the public to shell out money for it.

While Dan Brown’s international bestseller The Da Vinci Code can easily shift 40,000 copies here in a year, local publishers happily pop the bubbly when a book written by a Singapore author crawls past the 3,000 mark.

Despite the stacked odds, either out of ignorance or to prove a point, Singaporean authors are penning a flurry of books, and paying for them to be published.

Tai, a mother of two, spent more than a year scouring through hundreds of books at the Ang Mo Kio Community Library and jotting down the nutritional properties of apple skin, cucumbers and tomatoes.

She is not overly worried about the slow sales. “I wasn’t thinking of getting back the $20,000,” she says. She considers it a worthy investment — in getting people to eat healthier.

The stakes are high too for Joanna Wong, 46, a former bank senior manager, who liked spinning tales for her two sons so much that she sank $23,000 into publishing 10,000 copies of Squeaky ... He’s More Than A Squirrel.

Only 1,800 copies have shifted since. But her comfort is that she has at least “realised her dream of becoming a writer”.

By Ho Ai Li
Advent of Self-publishing Inc

THERE are no official figures on the number of self-published books here, as many are sold directly by the authors themselves over the Internet or among personal contacts.

But many in the trade, like Mr R. Ramachandran, executive director of the National Book Development Council (NBDC), detect a growing self-publishing fad.

Mr Johnon Lee, director of MarketAsia Distributors, has been enlisted to place about 150 of such self-published books in bookshops this year, up 30 per cent from a decade ago. Such books form half of the 300 local and foreign titles he handles each year.

Overall, more than 3,000 titles in English are produced in Singapore each year. This means about 10 new books are born every day.

The National Library, which keeps copies of nearly all local published work, says the number of English books published here has gone up from 2,150 in financial year 1995 to 3,480 in 2003. It fell to 3,140 last year.

Local publishers Flame Of The Forest and Monsoon Books receive on average of one manuscript a day. As few as two are accepted by each publisher a year, which means a success rate of less than 1 per cent.

The majority of the dashed hopeful authors swear off writing. But a few, Flame of The Forest’s Mr Chacko observes, refuse to take “no” for an answer, and resort to self-publish.

There is a growing breed of writers, like Singapore Management University business student Mint Kang, 22, who go it alone to avoid running into a wall of rejection from publishers unwilling to bet on an unknown name.

“Singapore publishers are picky, fussy and tend not to give people a good deal,” says Kang, who has self-published a 72-page collection of creative writing, on sale at Kinokuniya.

Traditionally, publishing houses undertake the cost of producing and distributing a book, paying the author 10 per cent of the cover price in royalties.

These days, authors like Kang have taken over this role, paying the printers and distributors themselves. The upside? They get to pocket the lion’s share of the profits, if any.

The snag? Upfront, they have to fork out at least $3,000 to print 1,000 no-frills copies of 100 odd pages each, to more than $8,000 for editing and cover design.

They also have to forgo about 60 per cent of the book’s price if they engage the services of a middleman, such as a distributor, to place their books in bookshops.

Still, as NBDC’s Mr Ramachandran notes: “As Singapore becomes wealthier, people are able to invest $5,000 to $10,000 and people are venturing into it.”

Usually, tell-tale signs of self-publishing are the name of the author or an obscure publishing house on the book bind, thin margins and grammatical errors.

To avoid these pitfalls, a support group for aspiring writers has sprung up online.

The Singapore Writers Guild, set up last April by civil servant Sam Choo, 46, now boasts 117 members. They pour out their frustrations, share dreams, exchange tips and salve each other’s wounds on www.writers.sg.

Of course, many opportunistic individuals also use the website as a platform to advertise their design or editing services to hopeful authors.

It grew out of Choo’s interest in getting feedback on how to publish a book on surviving the workplace. Groans the yet-to-be-published author: “Publishers are very selective. You have to be a celebrity or famous. They don’t want to take a chance on an unknown author.”

In their own defence, publishers maintain they have a right to be picky as it is costly to promote an unknown writer.

Mr Chacko estimates a three-month book promotion, including bookmarks or posters, costs $25,000. With printing and production costs of at least $10,000 for a print run of 3,000, you are looking at a $35,000 gamble.

As it is, they say, their margins are already paper-thin.

Distributors take 50 to 55 per

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FROM PAGE 52

Publication: The Straits Times
Date: 17 December 2005
Headline: So many authors, so few readers

cost of the retail price of each book, typically $10 to $25. A large part of this, about 40 per cent, goes to the bookshops for shelf display.

Authors get royalty payments of 8 to 12 per cent, depending on how well-known the author is. The cost of publishing the book takes up another 20 per cent.

The remaining 20 per cent, often less, is the publisher’s profit for assuming all the risks, from which it is expected to pay overheads like rents and salaries. If the book booms — as mine in 10 do — it could well be saddled with the loss.

As such, many publishers here prefer to put out in the abstract poetry collection “There’s no hurry to lose money,” quips two-man publishing outfit Firefruit’s Enoch Ng, who has published on

four titles this year.

Landmark, which sold 3,000 copies of socialite Miranda Eu’s memoirs three years ago, was not so lucky with its poetry collections, which it has published any local fiction over the past three years.

Meanwhile, Ethics Books, which has carved out a niche for itself in publishing poetry collections, has a strong following among those in the city who were in their early 20s, to write their own memoirs.

The candid account of her modelling trials, Cat Waiting in the Rain, is a part of her collection of her columns, titled Single Pleasures of Seeing Your Name in Print. In fact, this is when the real work begins.

Landmark’s Mr Goh says: “A lot of authors have had the National Arts Council’s grant to publish, but all these books are sitting in their storerooms at home.”

There’s no distribution network. Producing a book is one thing. What do you do after that?

The truth is, bookstores don’t sell books — authors do.

As it is, sales of most Singapore books barely breach the 1,000 mark.

Many authors are so disheartened they will never publish again.

Which is why, Rank Books owner Goh Khun Chuan says, authors should print no more than 1,000 copies and be prepared to go out and hustle.

“You can’t throw a book at a bookstore and expect to sell all the copies,” says Mr Goh, who runs a three-man outfit which produces eight books for self-publishing writers this year, including You Can Fly.

Market Asia’s Mr Lee adds: “A good book can get lost on the shelves.” Often, it gets shelved into the wrong sections.

“For example, motivational book Chicken Soup For The Soul is dumped in the cooking section, while a book on the Japanese Occupation of Singapore winds up on the tourism shelves.”

These days, beyond the routine book signings and launches, savvy authors give talks, launch websites, network with advertisers, attend school sessions, and generally milk as much publicity as possible to push their books.

Raymond Anthony Fernando, 55, has written five books ranging from Loving A Schizophrenic to a children’s poetry collection Joy To The World, which have sold about 400 copies each. He hawks his books himself, sending out copious e-mail messages to his contacts and giving talks.

“I ask writers to adopt a never-say-die attitude. Everywhere I go, I carry my book. You never know who you’ll bump into. A writer must be like a panther — ready to pounce on an opportunity,” he says.

What’s the next chapter in publishing?

It has become a game of survival of the fittest in the publishing industry.

About 700 publishing and printing houses, most of them two-man shops, post in a crowded market.

The bigger boys, like World Scientific, which publishes about 400 titles here and abroad and has a niche in academic sciences, in science and technology, have seen their annual turnover grow to about $30 million last year, a 15 per cent increase from 2003.

Other established names like Marshall Cavendish and SNP have made inroads overseas with Asian culture or cook books with international appeal, such as Betty Saw’s Ultimate Herbal Cookbook.

Asiapak Books, famed for manga-styled books on culture, has also attracted

ed overseas attention with a huge body of work on Zen philosophy. It has sold rights to titles like The Book Of Zen and Sun Tzu’s Art Of War to 30 foreign publishers in 20 countries. But the rest barely scrape by, say insiders.

The shake-up in the book retail scene has also seen the rise of boutique bookstores, Dymocks Bookcellers and the sale of MPH, Singapore’s first Singaporean-owned book store.

For the smaller players, it is now a time of consolidation — and introspection — on how to churn out books people want to read and abroad.

Many, like Mr Ramachandran, say there is no getting around the need to develop good writing — “the foundation of all creative work and arts.”

Marshall Cavendish’s group publisher Ela Tan says that Singapore has the raw writing talent, but it is now a matter of grooming them.

To that end, the Media Development Authority is looking to give up to $8,000 to 10 first-time children’s book authors this year. Last year, the National University of Singapore and The Arts House also launched a one-year fellowship worth $60,000 for Singaporean writers.

Professor Kripal Singh, a champion of Singapore writers and author of a poetry collection, Cat Waiting & The Games We Play, suggests: “Our universities should offer full-time creative writing courses — something which I have been calling for since 1988.”

“Our arts council should be more liberal in giving grants for writers to attend writing courses and our people must be more supportive by way of reading and discussing our works.”

The must be much more willing to promote, review and profile our local writers.

Perhaps this calls for a change in how writers are viewed, says Mr Ramachandran. “We should celebrate Singapore writers even if they haven’t reached world-class status yet. I think Singapore society doesn’t realise the role and importance of the arts.”

And that includes all writers, whether publishing or not. “If they have earned, or just because they cared enough about their message to pay for the paper.”

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SMU Publication: The Straits Times
Date: 17 December 2005
Headline: So many authors, so few readers

PRUDENCE PAYS
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TO-DO LIST
“Writing a book, like becoming an air stewardess and scuba diving, is one of the 100 things I want to do before I die.”
JANICE WONG, 29, a columnist for The New Paper on Sunday

UNPROFESSIONALISM
“I will always never encourage self-publishing. Ninety-nine per cent of them won’t get professional editing or lay-out. You just get really bad books.”
MONSOON BOOKS FOUNDER PHILIP TATHAM

Six Years Of Parrot
By Mint Kang (Fiction)
Paperback/72 pages/$6

THE Singapore Management University business student has self-published a collection of 15 short stories, poems and a play, The Cat’s Engineer, which won a consolation prize at the Singapore 21 Playwriting Competition in 2002.

This slim 72-page volume is the result of six years’ work. One gem of a short story is the concluding tale Be My Valentine, which has a stirring melancholic twist.

Kang, a Dunman High and Raffles Junior College alumnus, also illustrates her book with anime-style sketchings.

Available at Kinokuniya or at Kang’s website:
http://sg.geocities.com/starth_mint/ for $4.20