BOOKENDS

Bernard Koh

READER: Kirpal Singh, 58, university lecturer

He is a writer, poet and an associate professor of English literature and creative thinking at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

The first Asian and non-American elected to the American Creativity Association's board of directors, he is now its vice-president and chaired the International Creativity Conference held in Singapore last month.

He was also one of the two judges at the third Theatre Idol playwright competition, organised by Action Theatre, the finals of which were held last Monday.

He has three daughters and lives with his wife and son.

What are you reading now?
I am reading several books on creativity for my classes at SMU, and re-reading for the fourth time Cleopatra (1971) by Jack Lindsay. He is the son of Norman Lindsay, the artist and writer who gave children all over the world his famous book The Magic Pudding.

Most of us know Cleopatra through either history or Shakespeare: "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/Her infinite variety". But here, in finely written prose, is a scintillating recapturing of a woman of antiquity made contemporary, in terms of what she represents vis-a-vis womanhood. She was a woman who distinguished herself in many different fields - from ordering men to wanting love - and has continued to haunt men over centuries.

Cleopatra's maturity in sexuality and political emotionality is sensational, as is her capacity for caprice. The author is as fair as it is possible for anyone to be when narrating the complex life of a historic personage as controversial and engaging as this eternally seductive woman.

I think I begin to understand better the role and nature of women through reading this book.

If your house were burning down, which book would you save?
I would rush to rescue Shakespeare: Four Great Tragedies, an anthology of four of the Bard's greatest tragic works - Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet and Lear.

Through the years, each of these texts has meant much to me as its significance ebbed and flowed. From the sheer magic of the poetry to the power of the metaphoric dramatic unfoldings, here is a book which, on its own, could last a lifetime in terms of the force of what it offers: four of the greatest plays written in English.

Again and again I return to the musings of Hamlet, the anguish of Othello, the poetry of Macbeth and the suffering of Lear. Given the enormity of what these plays present, would I dare allow this anthology to burn?

Cleopatra (from £2.46 or S$6.80) is available from amazon.co.uk. Shakespeare: Four Great Tragedies ($16.95 with GST) is available at Borders.