Rediscovering Singapore’s literary pioneer

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Family, friends and lovers of the written word came together to celebrate Singapore literary pioneer Gopal Baratham (1935-2002) on Thursday night.

His son, lawyer Sayana Baratham, chose to stay away from the panel discussion on the life and times of his father at the Singapore Writers Festival, but he ended the night beautifully by reading a short story entitled Welcome.

The story is part of Collected Short Stories by Gopal Baratham, published by local publisher, Marshall Cavendish.

Festival director and poet Paul Tan called him "an important writer who enriched the Singapore literary canon".

He told Life! it was important to have Baratham as the focus of this year's SWF Literary Pioneer Showcase as "we want young writers to discover this literary voice and we want those of us who are familiar with him to rediscover him".

On Thursday night, academic and writer Kirpal Singh painted a vivid picture of the late writer whom he knew personally, to an audience of about 40 at the Singapore Management University's Campus Green.

Dr Singh called him "a kind of D.H. Lawrence of Singapore" and added: "You could feel the sheer power of his words. He remains, to date, the best short story writer of Singapore."

Baratham, a neurosurgeon, started writing in the 1960s but most of his literary achievements came much later. In the mid-1960s, he started work on a novel titled Fuel In Vacant Lots, which he never finished. He had three novels and three volumes of short stories published.

A Candle Or The Sun, his first and most controversial novel, was published only in 1991 though he had published many short stories before that.

It is a political thriller about a store manager who is drawn into spying for the government on his mistress, linked to an activist group. The novel, which criticised the political climate here, won the South-east Asia Write Award that year and was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Book Prize in 1992.

Apart from the many aspects of Baratham's writing and his richly layered works, Dr Singh also shared many first-hand encounters demonstrating how much the late writer cared for others.

For example, Baratham would part with his money if he met someone in dire need of it. They were friends for about 30 years and Dr Singh called him the "gentlest of human beings".

This mindfulness of others and his keen empathy added to "the richness of all his work". Dr Singh added that Baratham could deftly mix "the macabre with the beautiful, the prose with poetry", and therein lay the power of his writing. Festival director Tan, who moderated the discussion, called him a great writer, adding: "Even with some of his very old stories, there is wonderful wit." One of the founding fathers of neurosurgery here, Baratham studied at St Andrew's School, earned a medical degree from the University of Singapore in 1960 and trained in England. He died of pneumonia in 2002 at the age of 66.

Mindy Pang, editor at publisher Marshall Cavendish, and Crispin Rodrigues, student and part-time teaching assistant, were part of the panel celebrating the literary pioneer.

Rodrigues, 26, who is doing his post-graduate degree in English Literature at Nanyang Technological University, said he was drawn to Baratham's writing "because of his language and the lush visual imagery. I find something new each time I re-read his books".

Book lover Vidhya Nair, 37, who attended the session on Thursday night, called Baratham "a fascinating Singaporean writer because he straddled success as a neurosurgeon, yet wrote stories that discussed pain, identity and struggles of the every-day person, as if he was like everyone else".

She said what appeals to her about his writing was that he took risks.

His work, she added, was "clearly ahead of its time" as it took on many risque topics, including sex.

She said: "He wrote starkly about many other issues, such as the complexity of relationships and who we are in Singapore. It is great that his works have been republished.

"I never got to read all his work when I was younger. It is great that his immense contribution to Singapore literature is being celebrated."