

Limitless Hours of *Local Literature*

By Laura Schwartz

For many, the notion of reading local literature sounds like a school assignment or a hobby meant to make you appear cultured. And while there absolutely is value in seeking out diverse perspectives on large topics, reading local doesn't always have to be such a serious undertaking. I think a lot of expats hesitate to delve into works by Singaporean authors for the same reasons they waver over hawker center food: the assumption that it won't be to their taste. But like the food stalls, there's such a variety of options that at least one is bound to delight. Sampling a local take on science fiction, mystery, poetry – whatever your preference – might introduce you not only to a side of a beloved genre you haven't encountered before, but also to a side of Singapore you may not have known existed.

Much like the country itself, Singapore's literary scene is small yet vivacious. The intimacy of the community makes it comparatively easy to come face to face with the celebrities, especially at the annual Singapore Writers Festival. With the aim of promoting new and emerging Singaporean and Asian writers to an international audience, as well as presenting the world's major literary talents to Singaporeans, this 10-day event features panel discussions, writing workshops, programs for children, and dramatic performances. The festival is the perfect opportunity to not only attend talks with famous authors like David Sedaris and Roxanne Gay, but also to discover local literature. Alas, the SWF is only once a year, but there is a surprisingly vast amount of activities for book lovers to fill the other 355 days through the SWF Year-Round Programmes.

As expected, the library offers a wealth of resources beyond simply being able to borrow the latest Elena Ferrante novel. The gallery on the National Library's tenth floor houses rotating exhibitions on niche topics, such as ancient Malay manuscripts, advertising materials from Singapore's early years and poems that have appeared in MRT stations. Anyone intrigued by history's quirky details should also check out the online exhibition, which features highlights from their collection of rare publications, manuscripts, documents, maps and photographs that aren't physically available to the public.

The Singapore Book Council and The Arts House both run a variety of talks and workshops that allow you to connect with local writers in order to hone your own craft. For years, the Singapore Book Council has taught courses on everything to do with writing, from introductions to storytelling, to adapting a published piece to the stage, to literary translation techniques. Workshops with The Arts House go deeper than craft, often focusing on the very soul and spirit of writing. Their popular 'Remember When' workshop blends creative writing and theater to teach participants how to transform powerful memories into vibrant monologues. At the beginning of the lockdown, they launched a 'Write From Home' series that explored the benefits and opportunities of writing in this unusual time. Difference Engine, an independent comics publisher, regularly offers classes and advice on writing, drawing and producing comics.



Laura grew up in Tokyo, Singapore and New Jersey before majoring in Japanese Studies at Bard College, upper New York. Her fiction and non-fiction writing has appeared in The Shanghai Review, Thoughtful Dog Magazine and The Wall Street Journal. A voracious traveler, Laura has visited over 30 countries.

The Arts House is also experimenting with ways to bring local narratives to audiences in new and creative ways. Their on-going online event 'Sorta Scary Singapore Stories' presents urban myths with 360° illustrations and clips from audiobooks. The Arts House is also home to the annual StoryFest, which celebrates the power of storytelling and styles of oral traditions. After all, before we learned to read, we were told stories. This festival taps into that cozy mental space and offers a unique, active avenue to engage with Singapore's literary canon. The event moved online for 2020 but will likely return to the stage next summer.

The phrase 'reading local literature' often conjures the vision of a prolix tome about a regional historical event packed with unfamiliar vocabulary and inscrutable character motivations, but Singapore's literature is as dynamic and alive as the city's hawker centers. And like good food, a good story is one of the most enjoyable ways to get to know a different culture. Below, I've listed a few titles chock-full of enough plot and humor to prove that reading local doesn't even sort of have to be boring, as well as indie bookstores where you can find them.

Recommended Not-So-Heavy Reading

- *Aunty Lee's Delights* by Ovidia Yu – The first of a cozy mystery series that follows amateur detective Aunty Lee as she solves the murder of a woman on Sentosa
- *Ministry of Moral Panic* by Amanda Lee Koe – 'Heartfelt and sexy' might not be how most expats would describe Singapore, but Koe's short stories illuminate that side of the nation with gorgeous prose
- *Harris Bin Potter* by The Stoned Philosopher by Suffian Hakim – A funny and uniquely Singaporean take on the wizard series everyone knows
- *From the Belly of the Cat* – A collection of short fiction assembled by Stephanie Ye. If you only read one story, let it be Joshua Ip's hilarious tongue-in-cheek "ROBOTZ ATTACK THE CITEHR"
- *Let's Give It Up For Gimme Lao!* by Sebastian Sim – A darkly humorous satire of Singapore's fixation on education, achievement and social status

Recommended Bookstores

- *BooksActually* (Yong Siak St) – Both a bookshop and a publishing house, BooksActually is a major hub of the Singapore literature scene
- *Littered with Books* (Duxton Rd) - Taking up two stories in a cozy shophouse, this store has the personal air of a librarian's home
- *GOHD Books* (Bencoolen St) – Specializes in rare tomes and first editions, many of which are regional classics
- *Woods in the Books* (Yong Siak St) – A thoughtfully-curated selection of young children's books
- *Select Books* (online) – Legendary supplier of books and publications on Asia, with topics ranging from MRT art to historical analyses to romance novels

