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## The Year That Was

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## **Abstract**

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By any measure 1991 and 1992 were crucial years for the literary, dramatic and arts scene in Singapore. The publication, in 1991, of George Nonis' book, *Hello Chok Tong Goodbye Kuan Yew* almost signalled a new mood, a new phase in the cultural and literary ethos of this small nation-state. Nonis commented that it had taken him a long time to bring his book (a book essentially of cartoons lampooning political life in Singapore but taking some risks of the sort he thought the new Prime Minister – Goh Chok Tong – will be more receptive to than the old Prime Minister – Mr Lee Kuan Yew) but that he finally decided to do so after hearing and reading of Mr Goh Chok Tong and the 'open' style of government.

This 'open' mood also saw the setting up – and subsequent report – of a National Review Committee on Censorship. For a long time writers, artists, and film and television people had been nervous about censorship and several had had their works objected to. The setting up of a Ministry of the Arts and the Singapore National Arts Council (this latter body chaired by a very respected Singaporean – Professor Tommy Koh) meant here was a chance for an overhaul. And the overhaul did begin. Several young writers and people connected with the arts were appointed to this National Committee and their recommendations have had a fundamental impact on the production and circulation of arts. Of course, the majority of Singaporeans – if we are to believe the Press and media – were quite uncomfortable with some of the Committee's recommendations (such as allowing the 'R' rating for films to be aged 18) and wanted a more conservative dismantling (if at all) of existing censorship rules and procedures. Thus Singapore did – and does – get films which previously was not possible (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *Wild at Heart*, *Basic Instinct*...) but there are still strong restrictions and some films, one guesses, will still never be allowed commercially (i.e. the concept of 'art' cinemas and 'adult' cinemas is not one which sits comfortably with the conservative population). It is interesting to note that while some lobbying for a magazine such as *Cosmopolitan* took place, the magazine (along with predictable others – e.g. *Playboy*) remains banned/censored.

But the relaxation is real and not to be frowned upon. Apart from the cinema, its big impact has been on the fiction produced in Singapore and on the plays performed. Several controversial plays (with nude/near nude scenes for example) have been allowed on stage but to audiences eighteen and above (I should state that for films the 'R' rating is for those above twenty-one). While ministerial comment has been to signal caution lest the relaxed atmosphere becomes promiscuous, the actual productions have been fairly free – thus plays such as *Private Parts* and *Two Glam One* have taken the concept of theatre freedom to new heights in Singapore.

The visual art scene has been similarly freed from anxieties of certain censorship; thus quite explicit nude drawings featuring sometimes portraits of the artists themselves have made their appearances at places like *The Substation* and been the subject of discussion and debate. Sexuality as a theme is very much in the light as it were as more and more young Singaporeans begin to express their own perceptions openly and artistically. For the first time in Singapore's art history, artists were now prepared to put their

own private life as artists for public view – a bold, challenging step which prompts newfound confidence but which also still invites strong resistance.

In 1990 the present writer had publicly stated that 'the next few years will see an inevitable increase in the production of literary works which, while not being particularly of a high literary quality, will, nevertheless, be very popular'. The context was the overwhelming success of sensational storybooks, fictions of the supernatural, horror, the bizarre, the ghostly. Both 1991 and 1992 saw this prediction coming through almost with a vengeance! Book after book appeared and book after book sold – the entire face of literary readership seemed to be changing; the macabre, the deviously comic, the strange and the frightening were hot themes, and among them they captured readers. Sales of books at the Annual Book Fairs reached unimaginable heights with some titles selling thousands over a couple of days – a phenomena perhaps not unknown in some countries but certainly new to the Singapore literary scene.

Much of the new reader-following can be attributed to two factors: one, a willingness on the part of writers to venture forth into newer areas of expression (so the comic book now becomes an accepted part of 'literature') which attempt to make sense of 'taboo' experiences (hence several books dealt with themes of homosexuality, bizarre sex, transvestism) and, two, a more open discussion of various books and issues by the reading public. It must here be noted that one major breakthrough was achieved by and through the publication of *Excuse Me Are You a Model* by Bonny Hicks. This autobiographical book, written by a young twenty-one-year-old model who confessed to having an English father who wanted nothing to do with her, affairs with several different men and the trials which invariably awaited a young woman in the modelling industry/business, made a huge impact on the Singaporean sensibility. Public forums and discussions were held where the author was condemned, damned, praised, defended and where she herself appeared to give her side of the story. *Excuse Me Are You a Model* took Singapore literature by storm and within a few it had unprecedented sales and the author became a 'literary' figure overnight! The book is significant; written simply but with enormous candour, it basically said, 'look at me, I didn't go to University, this is my story, these are the men I've been with, this is my background and this is what it took me to become a professional model.' It is, in its own way, a moving book, naive perhaps at times, but on the whole mature, confident, assertive, frank, honest. It was the brutal honesty which disturbed and offended the moral pundits, chief among them, ironically a woman who was (and is) involved with women's rights! Bonny Hicks went on to write a second book, this time a novel, *Discuss Disgust*, again having as her theme the untalked-about subject of women who prostituted themselves discreetly in order to bring up their kids. Written primarily from the point of view of the young heroine (if that term could be used) the book disturbingly challenges the image of Singapore as a squeaky clean, morally upright society. Other books which might be mentioned here include Joash Moo's *Sisterhood* (again the subject of comment in the Press regarding its morality since it appeared to endorse and condone those who were transvestites), Gopal Baratham's *Sayang* (described by many readers, at least verbally, as being almost pornographic), Antonio Chan's *Lusts from the Underworld* (a racy story of gangsters and sex), Colin Cheong's *Poets Priests and Prostitutes* (motorcycle gangs, girls and the contradictions of evolving identities), Felix Chia's *The Lady in Red and her Companion* (naughty stories about naughty women), Johnny Lau's *Medium Rare* (a lot of sex and the bizarre, made into a film), Johann Lee's *Peculiar Chris* (about a gay), Sumiko Tan's *Sisters in Crime* (culled from the newspapers and police reports about women in crime) and Felix Soh's *Harlots* (about sex and its deviant pleasures, withdrawn within weeks of publication on account of its unhealthy morality).

The above should not lead readers to conclude that no serious fiction/poetry was produced (incidentally many of the writers venturing into categories discussed above see

themselves as 'serious'): several were. Gopal Baratham's *A Candle or the Sun*, Rex Shelley's *The Shrimp People*, Simon Tay's *Stand Alone*, Kelvin Tan's *All Broken Up and Dancing*, Catherine Lim's *The Women's Book of Superlatives* and Alex Soh's *Double on the Rocks* are all works of fiction which deserve special attention – in them a certain literary quality is obvious, as is the treatment of significant themes which transcend simple grids of time and place. Koh Buck Song's *A Brief History of Toa Payoh and Other Poems* should be mentioned as it tries to document, poetically, the radical nature of physical change in Singapore – a change impinging on the psyche of the sensitive. Boey Kim Cheng's *Another Place*, his second volume, continues and expands the obvious strengths found in his first volume of poems, *Somewhere Bound*. Boey's is an important poetic voice and he is a poet to watch.

A survey of this nature will be incomplete if attention was not drawn to the establishment of the Singapore Literature Prize – funded by a publisher and administered by the National Book Development Council. It carries a top prize of \$10,000 and several minor prizes. The Annual National Book Awards has, recently, been challenged to name their judges – a call which the present writer has been consistently making since their inception many years ago. Anonymity in judging is no longer seen to be excusable and with controversies surrounding the latest awards (the Award went to Rex Shelley and Gopal Baratham was awarded a Commendation – Baratham declined the Award insisting that his novel ought to have won!) the sooner the Book Council announces publicly its annual judges the better.

On the whole things are really looking up in Singapore; there is heightened scholarly interest in Singaporean literature (though we still await the first real *study* of it!) and creative writing is actively being promoted with several Creative Writing Programmes in the offing. These programmes allow the bringing in of international writers to Singapore to share their experiences and achievements. Doris Lessing was in Singapore in 1991 and it is hoped that Nadine Gordimer will be here in 1993. Publishers are now far more willing to publish local books and many of the big international publishers are also moving into the area. *Singa* continues to publish established and new writers and public readings of prose and poetry are encouraged and well attended. For the first time in Singapore's history, there was a series of readings at a pub co-ordinated by Kirpal Singh – every Sunday for three months the readings continued – unfortunately the fortunes of the owner of the pub got into complications and the readings ended quite abruptly! But there is a definite interest and a definite future here!

It is likely that as Singapore matures and as the ruling ethnic demands a more serious stocktaking, the arts are going to flourish. Moves are currently underway to have all Singapore schools expose their students to Singaporean writings. There is full support coming from many different quarters and it will behove the Singaporean writer to realise the new emphasis and be ready for delivery!

KIRPAL SINGH