

Ordinary lives in the spotlight on NUS History Prize shortlist

Six titles – a mix of academic work and historical fiction – are in the running for the \$50,000 award

Ng Wei Kai

The stories of average Singaporeans take centre stage on the shortlist of this year's National University of Singapore (NUS) History Prize.

The shortlist of six for the \$50,000 prize includes historical tome *Seven Hundred Years: A History Of Singapore* (2019) by Kwa Chong Guan, Tan Tai Yong, Peter Borschberg and Derek Heng, and also novels and non-fiction with a personal slant.

The mix of academic work and historical fiction forgoes the traditional view of history as a record of big movers and shakers, say authors.

In the running is Kamaladevi Aravindan's novel *Sembawang* (2020), which details life in the estate of the same name across five decades.

National Institute of Education senior lecturer Anitha Devi Pillai helped her mother Kamaladevi research and translate the novel from Tamil.

"This story looks at history and historical events from a layperson's perspective because to us history is not only what happened and how it happened, but also what events meant to average people," says Dr Anitha, who is in her 40s.

Sembawang is up against another novel, the Singapore Literature Prize-winner *State Of Emergency* (2017), which follows an extended family living through the

leftist political movements and detentions of Singapore and Malaysia.

The shortlisting came as a surprise to New York-based author Jeremy Tiang as his book was published four years ago.

The 2021 prize is open to non-fiction and fiction works in English, written or translated, that were published from January 2017 to May 30 this year.

"The 1950s feel like a particularly exciting time in Singapore's history, in that the country's future seemed up for grabs," says Tiang, 44, in an e-mail interview.

"I think it's good to look at the circumstances that led us to where we are today, and to consider how things could have been different."

The shortlist also features non-fiction work with a personal slant, such as *Leluhur: Singapore's Kampong Gelam* (2019) by Hidayah Amin, which shines a light on the history of a place many now know only as a tourist attraction.

Hidayah, 48, was born in Gedung Kuning (Yellow Mansion), a heritage royal building at the heart of Kampong Glam.

She says: "As someone born and raised in Kampong Gelam and whose family's history is deeply rooted there since the 1840s, I felt that I was the right person to introduce readers to the rich history and anthropological stories of Kampong Gelam residents."

Eminent NUS historian Wang Gungwu, 90, is nominated for his memoir, *Home Is Where We Are* (2020), which was written with his late wife Margaret and looks back on their youth in Singapore and Malaysia. Mrs Wang died last year a few months before the book's launch.

"I am happy to hear that the period that Margaret and I lived through and wrote about, the 1950s and 1960s, is of interest today. We were then very young and

hopeful and eager to help in our own way," says Prof Wang.

Some of the shortlisted titles are also in the running for other prizes.

Imperial Creatures (2019) by Timothy P. Barnard, which looks at the relationship between humans and animals in colonial Singapore, is a finalist for the British Society for the History of Science's Hughes Prize.

Sembawang and *Home Is Where We Are* are up for the Singapore Book Awards.

The NUS History Prize was created in 2014 and is awarded every three years. The inaugural prize went in 2018 to archaeologist John Miksic for his book *Singapore And The Silk Road Of The Sea, 1300-1800*.

NUS Asia Research Institute distinguished fellow Kishore Mahbubani, who mooted the prize in a *Straits Times* column, says: "The famous American social scientist, Benedict Anderson, said that nations are 'imagined communities'. A shared imagination, especially in history, is a critical glue holding societies today."

"Singapore has just begun its journey of discovering its long history. The Singapore History Prize is playing a critical nation-building role by presenting Singaporeans with insightful new understandings of their long and rich history."

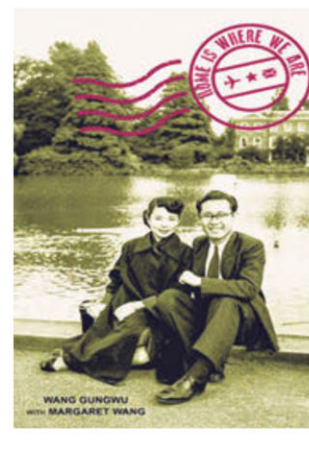
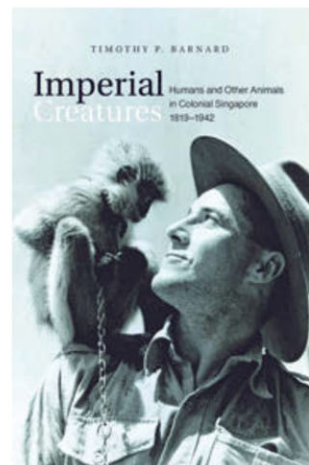
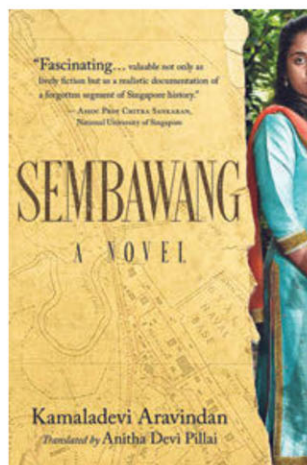
The prize's nominating committee, which reviewed 31 books submitted by publishers, comprised Associate Professor Ian Gordon, former head of the NUS Department of History; Assistant Professor Seng Guo Quan; educator Beatrice Chong; curator Suhaili Osman; and playwright Alfian Sa'at.

The winner of the prize will be chosen by a jury chaired by Mr Mahbubani and announced in October.

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Leluhur: Singapore's Kampong Gelam by Hidayah Amin (left) introduces readers to the rich history and anthropological stories of Kampong Glam residents. PHOTO: HIDAYAH AMIN



The other books on the shortlist are (from left): *State Of Emergency* by Jeremy Tiang; *Sembawang* by Kamaladevi Aravindan; *Imperial Creatures* by Timothy P. Barnard; *Home Is Where We Are* by Wang Gungwu and Margaret Wang; and *Seven Hundred Years: A History Of Singapore* by Kwa Chong Guan, Tan Tai Yong, Peter Borschberg and Derek Heng. PHOTOS: EPIGRAM BOOKS, MARSHALL CAVENDISH, NUS PRESS