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 novels Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore (2019) by Kwa Chong Guan, Tan Tai Yang, Peter Borschberg and Derek Heng, and also novels and non-fiction with a personal slant.

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

In the running is Kamaladevi Aravindan’s novel Sembangauw (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.

“History looks at history and historical events from a hypothetical perspective because in history it is not only what happened and how it happened, but also what events meant to average people,” says Dr Anitha, who is her sis.

Sembangauw 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 deportations of Singapore and Malaysia.

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

The 202 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 felt 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 great 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 Lee Lai’s Singapore’s Kampong Gelam (2019) by Hidayah Amit, which shines a light on the history of a place many now know only as a tourist attraction.

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

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 it was the right person to introduce readers in the rich history and anthropological context of Kampong Gelam residents.”

Eminent NUS historian Wang Guangyou, 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. Ms Wang died last year a few months before the book’s launch.

“I am happy to hear that the pocket that Margaret and I lived through and wrote about, the 1940s and 1950s, 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. Indian 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.

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

The NUS History Prize was created in 2004 and is awarded every three years. The inaugural prize went in 2008 to archaeologists John Millett for his book Singapore: The Silk Road Of The Sea, 1300-1800.

NUS Asia Research Institute distinguished fellow Kishore Mahbubani, who mentored 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 crucial for holding societies together today.”

“Singapore has seen a 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 Sing Ee Quan, educator Beatrice Chong; curator Sabihah Osman; and playwright Alifan Sait.

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

The other books on the shortlist are: (from left) State Of Emergency by Jeremy Tiang; Sembangauw by Kamaladevi Aravindan; Imperial Creatures by Timothy P. Barnard; Home Is Where We Are by Hidayah Amit and Margaret Wang; and Seven Hundred Years: A History Of Singapore by Kwa Chong Guan, Tan Tai Yang, Peter Borschberg and Derek Heng.