

Wang Gungwu, Suratman Markasan on Singapore Literature Prize shortlist at 91

Toh Wen Li and Olivia Ho

Historian Wang Gungwu and literary pioneer Suratman Markasan have made the Singapore Literature Prize shortlist aged 91. They are the oldest writers nominated for this year's prize, the shortlist of which was announced yesterday.

Home Is Where We Are, the second part of Wang's memoirs, is in the running for English creative non-fiction.

It is the first time on the shortlist for the National University of Singapore (NUS) professor, who is known for his research on Chinese history. It was "a sweet surprise", he told *The Straits Times*.

The book, which follows *Home Is Not Here* (2018), was written with his wife Margaret Wang, who died before it was published.

By the time he started working

on it, she could no longer write. "I asked her if I could use what she had earlier written for our children and she agreed," he recalled. Together they chose the parts she wanted to be included and the final version was read to her before it was sent to the publisher.

Suratman, a Cultural Medallion recipient, has been shortlisted for four previous editions of the prize.

He dominates this year's Malay creative non-fiction category with his essay collections, *Mengasah Kalam Jilid 2* (Honing The Pen Volume 2) and *Mengapa Saya Menulis* (Why Do I Write).

The biennial prize, organised by the Singapore Book Council, is Singapore's oldest ongoing literary award in all four official languages.

This year, 49 works were shortlisted across the genres of poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

The top prize in each category comes with \$3,000 and a trophy.

Of the 43 writers shortlisted, five are contesting in two or more categories.

Former *Straits Times* journalist Clara Chow is the first writer in the history of the prize to be shortlisted in three categories across two languages.

She has been nominated for her travelogue *New Orleans* in the English creative non-fiction category; *Not Great, But At Least Something* in English fiction; and *Lousy Love Poems* in Chinese poetry.

Chow, 44, said: "I'd somehow convinced myself that I wasn't getting shortlisted."

She added that she felt "a dazed kind of gratefulness".

Hermit Press, which she founded, put out *New Orleans* and *Not Great, But At Least Something* in tiny runs of 30 to 50 copies.

"These books really are my babies. I did the layout and cover design, editing, print-readying and marketing myself. It's a labour of love.

"I was just asking myself: Why am I doing this? It got to a point where I felt very happy when I was not thinking about writing. I was considering becoming a painter instead. But having the Singapore Literature Prize judging panel read and like Hermit Press' output has given me new energy to keep going."

New Orleans is in competition with Kagan Goh's debut memoir *Surviving Samsara: A Memoir Of Breakdowns, Breakthroughs, And Mental Illness*, and Nilanjana Sen-gupta's *The Votive Pen: Writings On Edwin Thumboo*, a biography of the veteran Singapore poet.

Not Great, But At Least Something is up against Cyril Wong's *This Side Of Heaven*, Daryl Qilin Yam's *Shantih Shantih Shantih*,

Mallika Naguran's *She Never Looks Quite Back* and Jee Leong Koh's *Snow At 5pm: Translations Of An Insignificant Japanese Poet*.

Koh is also in the running for the English poetry prize for his collection *Connor & Seal*.

Other contenders are Daryl Lim Wei Jie's *Anything But Human*, Mok Zining's *The Orchid Folios*, Pooja Nansi's *We Make Spaces Divine*, and Yeow Kai Chai's *One To The Dark Tower Comes*.

Yeow and Nansi are the former and present directors of the Singapore Writers Festival respectively.

The Singapore Literature Prize was established in 1992. There were 192 submissions this year, down from 224 in 2020 – "an indication of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the publishing industry", the book council said.

This year's winners will be an-

nounced at a ceremony at Victoria Theatre on Aug 25, during which Thumboo will be conferred the SBC Achievement Award.

The public may vote online in the Readers' Favourite category. Winning writers will receive \$1,000 each, while voters stand a chance to win book vouchers.

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SINGAPORE LITERATURE PRIZE AWARDS CEREMONY

WHERE Victoria Theatre,
9 Empress Place
MRT City Hall
When Aug 25, 8pm
Admission Free with
registration at bit.ly/3IKM0Fc
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