

Writing from the heart

Personal experiences bleed onto the page for Malaysian writers Dr Fahd Razy and Daryl Kho, panellists at the George Town Literary Festival 2022 (Nov 24 to 27). Tan Gim Fan speaks to them via email.

Daryl Kho's *Mist-Bound: How to Glue Back Your Grandpa* (Penguin Random House SEA, 2021) is a fantasy novel inspired by his father's affliction with, and eventual passing from, dementia. It won the Hedwig Anuar Children's Book Award by the Singapore Book Council, given to the country's most outstanding children's middle-grade book of the past two years. It then won the 2022 Singapore Book Award for Best Young Persons Title (ages 7-18 years), presented by the Singapore Book Publishers Association. Now based in Singapore and working as a media rights licensing professional in the regional broadcast industry, Kho sells other people's stories for a living. During his student days in Malaysia, Canada and the US, he composed poetry, songs, plays, musicals and even kung-fu skits.

Would you say events such as the GTLF are a good vehicle for reaching new audiences?
Yes they are and even more so indirectly. They're great for industry networking, with other authors, publishers, distributors and press: connections that could potentially lead to doors to new markets and audiences. More so, conferences and festivals are amazing learning experiences for me, especially when I was starting out as a clueless wannabe author. Particularly so the Asian Festival of Children's Content, because they had sessions like 'How to get published' and 'Great Book Openings', which served as Beginner 101 courses on the publishing industry and the craft of writing. In addition, the AFCC provides an amazing platform for aspiring authors to pitch in person to publishers, in a 'speed-dating' type set-up. That's where I pitched to Penguin SEA, which eventually led to my book deal. This will be my first time at the GTLF and I'm really looking forward to it!

You started writing seriously again after your father's dementia diagnosis. Did it help you come to terms with that, and his death?

This book came to mean many things for me. Originally, it started out as a paper bottle of memories, created to contain mementos of my parents, to be passed down to my daughter Alexis, and even her own kids and grandkids.

Unintentionally, it ended up also becoming for me a repository for sadness and an outlet for grief and guilt. Sadness about his condition, for his lost memories and lost personality that then turned into grief when he passed. Guilt for failing to be a better son, for failing to be there much, for not just being unable to prevent but also inadvertently causing his condition. You see, he had his first stroke hours after we'd had an extremely unhealthy fat-laden father-son catch-up meal at my favourite kopitiam.

The making of this book also became a refuge from a series of career setbacks that I was going through then. It gave me much-needed reassurance that I still had it within myself to create, and still had value to offer.

Between the time you started working on *Mist-Bound* and completing it, your daughter grew up. What did the book do for her and the family that amazed you most?

Yes, Alexis literally grew up with this book. She saw it come together piece by painful piece, through reading way too many drafts for me, witnessing papa tearing his hair out at the keyboard on weeknights and cursing at the computer screen on weekends. She also experienced the results at the other end of the road, years later. Joining me for story readings and author talks, getting interviewed by the press herself and, perhaps best of all, getting to see her own illustrated alter ego sitting on bookstore shelves. Being a teenager now, Alexis would probably deny it, but I suspect she finds it rather neat to be the star of her own book, and that its readers from various places know her by name. She is currently in the literary programme of an arts-based secondary school in Singapore. Again, she would be the last person on earth to admit it, but I'd like to think it went some ways in inspiring her to be a writer herself. Like Alexis in the book, she's becoming her own storyteller.

Which part of *Mist-Bound* was the hardest to write? Did its fantastical characters come easily to you?

The hardest part to write were the opening two chapters. Those went through the most rewrites. Because they had to do so much: capture my father as he was before his memory loss; illustrate the relationship between Alexis (the star of the book) and her grandfather as I'd dreamed for it to be had dementia not happened; describe the 'real world' the story opens in; contain the inciting incident that took away his memories and



Kho with daughter Alexis, the star of her own book

through all that, somehow still try to be as entertaining as possible for easily-bored and distracted young readers.

Coming up with the characters and creatures was fun and thus not too difficult. Hitting on the main story idea was even easier. It was perhaps a day after my daughter turned five. I was packing up my childhood bedroom as I was moving my parents to an apartment where dad — not having full mobility as the result of his strokes — wouldn't have to deal with staircases anymore. I happened across a box of my old college plays. Rereading them re-lit a forgotten flame. That was when I knew I needed to write again. Because Alexis' birthday was still fresh in my mind, who to write for and what to write came a minute after.

My dad's stroke, semi-paralysis and memory loss came just three months before she was born, and through that resulting tough period, her birth was the only thing the whole family had to look forward to. As it drew closer, even my dad's condition improved significantly. Her Chinese name was chosen to reflect that: Rui Qing, which means the first flower bud of spring. It was as though she was his cure, and the end to our winter. So, voila, it dawned on me to write a story of how she would go on a quest to gather the cure to restore her Grandpa's memories, and one of the key ingredients would be nectar from the First Flower of Spring.

The artwork for the book is beautiful. Have you worked with Silly Jellie before?

Silly Jellie is an amazing illustrator from Miri, Sarawak, introduced to me by my cousin Serah (a very talented artist herself). It's our first collaboration and working with her to paint out on paper what I had dreamed in my head was definitely one of the best parts of this book's journey.

What do you get most from writing?

Rather than joy, the process more often brings me angst and frustration! I'd also say writing was something I turned to whenever I was sad, lonely or depressed. I suppose tears often make good ink. I realised discovering something that helps make you less sad is just as important as finding something that makes you happy. Perhaps even more so. It offers you a way to take something dark or painful and turn it on its head into something of beauty. Like taking a person's illness and death and turning it instead into a celebration of his life and legacy.

Are you planning to continue with creative writing? Any particular themes or types of books?

In June, I had a short story about the metaverse published by HarperCollins Kids in its anthology for sci-fi and mystery stories called *Flipped!* It's a spiff-up of a piece I'd first published way back when I was a high school student. As for writing

new material, yes I would like to, but the day job is not allowing me to think too much about that yet. Furthermore, I suspect *Mist-Bound* will continue to keep me busy outside the office. Post-GTLF there are a couple of author events slated, including a fundraiser for dementia. At this time of writing, a publishing deal is baking in the oven to translate *Mist-Bound* for a major book market. I recently signed with a Korea-Los Angeles-based producer who is working on bringing the book from page to screen. (Caution: These things typically take years, if at all, to happen.) So, fingers and toes crossed, *Mist-Bound*'s story is only just beginning!

Dementia is a growing concern today. Are you involved with groups helping patients and carers? How best can books help?

Sort of like a prosocial enterprise but in book form, I wanted *Mist-Bound* to entertain but also do some good at the same time. Specifically, it has four main aims, which are to increase appreciation of our grandparents; the importance of family; stories, folktales and myths, especially those from our region and from within the minds of our elders; and to grow awareness of dementia. All these are held together by this central quote that served as the book's North Star: "When an old person dies, a library burns to the ground." (Amadou Hampâté Bâ)

When an old person dies, a treasure trove of knowledge, experience and stories is lost forever. When a person has dementia, it's as though the shelves are in flames and burning through the books while they're still standing and breathing. Dementia is an increasingly prevalent issue facing families and society, yet it's often difficult to talk to young children about this disease in an insightful and thoughtful way.

Through its fairy-tale premise, this book helps serve at least as a starting point for early awareness among young readers, and a jump-off platform for conversations to be had about the topic with them, by parents or teachers. Hopefully in a more fun and engaging way, compared to hitting them over the head with dry facts, figures and jargon through a medical textbook.

To drive the dementia awareness objective, *Mist-Bound* has been supported by non-profit organisations such as Dementia Singapore (part of Alzheimer's Disease International, or ADI) and TOUCH Community Services, a social services charity. I've also worked alongside the Alzheimer's Disease Foundation of Malaysia (ADFM), which is part of the ADI Network. I've done fundraising campaigns, Intro to Dementia radio talks and dementia-related interviews for various video and print publications, groups like ProjectWeForgot (a support community for dementia caregivers), as well as continued to speak about it to students in schools.

A caregiver sharing session event I did last year for the ADFM had special meaning because my dad used to attend daycare there and it was invaluable in keeping him mentally and physically occupied while simultaneously giving my mum much needed time off as a caregiver.

Is fantasy close to your heart? Would you say it's a quick and most effective way to reach young readers today?

The books that I read as a child gave me the palette from which I paint my world to this very day. There were definitely many influential and inspiring 'realist' books. But I think for me, the folklore and fantasy-based stories expanded my range of hues in more ways and directions. They opened my mind to the idea that I could dream up entire worlds that didn't have to be exactly like the one I live in.

I'm not qualified to speak on what way is most effective. I can only speak from my own experience, as a former young reader and still-overgrown child. Fantasy books are probably why I'm still a Toys'R'Us Kid who never grew up, and why I remain a hopeless, impractical dreamer. But like Grandpa tells Alexis in *Mist-Bound*: "What are dreams, but memories just waiting to be made? Like ink, waiting to be spilt onto paper and woven into words. Memories make us who we are; dreams make us who we'll become. So always remember — to dream BIG!"

For more on the George Town Literary Festival, visit georgetownlitfest.com. Check out darylkho.com for details on *Mist-Bound* and its author, and @fahdrazy for information on the doctor-writer.