

An *adventure* into *fairyland*

► Author Daryl Kho weaves a charming tale of a young girl's quest to restore her grandfather's memories

■ BY **MATTHEW YAP**

EARLIER this year, I had the pleasure of meeting Malaysian author Daryl Kho at a meet-the-author event held at Kinokuniya. Kho had returned from Singapore to promote his book *Mist Bound: How to Glue Back Grandpa*. I found Kho a warm and genuine family man who generously shared his writing process with us.

Family is the heart of *Mist Bound*, and one can clearly see Kho as a son and a father through his writing.

Kho's own father, and daughter Alexis, are his primary sources of inspiration. In 2009, his father suffered two strokes that led to vascular dementia. Kho spoke of the helplessness of watching the disease consume his father's mind and sense of self. Every day, his father grew a little further from his family. Kho also shared how he regretted that his daughter never got to know her grandfather as the man they all remembered.

Mist Bound is something of a wish-fulfilment fantasy in a sense. Kho wrote his family members as characters in his story, thereby gifting his daughter the opportunity to save her grandfather's memories and in the process, Alexis comes to know her grandfather better.

Furthermore, Kho's story lovingly pays tribute to his mother and honours her selfless sacrifices as her husband's primary caregiver.

In *Mist Bound*, Alexis is a young girl who visits her grandparents over the holidays. While she feels her grandmother is a distant and slightly intimidating figure, Alexis enjoys a close friendship with her grandpa.

They take many walks through the forest, where grandpa regales her with legends from around the world.

One day, Alexis asks grandpa to tell her the story of how he met grandma. Grandpa says he travelled to another world to win the heart and hand of a fairy princess. Alexis initially assumes this is another of grandpa's tall tales. Unfortunately, the pair lose track of time and Alexis accidentally steps on some sticks, which turns out to be the home of a kenit. The kenit, an



imp-like creature named Riff, is outraged at the destruction of his beloved home.

To protect Alexis, grandpa takes the blame. Riff punishes him by cursing grandpa's memories to oblivion. Riff quickly regrets his actions and tells Alexis that a cure exists: memory glue. Unfortunately, the ingredients for memory glue are rather exotic: they need pieces of a garuda's nest, Duyung sweat and hair from a baku's snout.

Alexis learns that her grandmother is indeed the fairy princess of grandpa's story. Together with Riff, they must venture into the fairyland of Mist to find the ingredients they need.

Kho generates cross-cultural pollination in his narrative by integrating legends from around the world, particularly from East and Southeast Asia. Alexis and her companions encounter a batuan (rock trolls from Indonesia), bunians (Bornean forest spirits) and nangmai (Thai nymphs). Alexis draws upon the wisdom of these legends to solve the problems she faces.

For example, she wins a running contest against a pixiu, a Chinese hybrid beast, by using the story of Ganesha and Karthik's race around the world as inspiration.

Structurally, *Mist Bound* follows the traditional quest narrative that is integral to facilitating maturation in children's literature. The tribulations Alexis must overcome to save grandpa test her ingenuity and tenacity, and she learns of the boundless determination she possesses. She and grandma also develop a powerful bond of trust.

Although *Mist Bound* is Kho's first novel, its impact on the regional literary landscape has been significant. To date, it has won the Hedwig Anuar Children's Book Award and the 2022 Singapore Book Award for the "Best Young Persons Title".



Mist Bound, written by Kho, is a book suitable for the whole family. – **DARYL KHO**

Many children in Malaysia, especially those raised in middle-class and English-speaking households, are raised on Western fairy tales and fables. Fairy tales are among the earliest cultural artefacts that children receive during their formative years. Therefore, the stories that children are exposed to can play a pivotal role in shaping how the next generation relates to the world around them.

By weaving regional legends into his

narrative, Kho shows how relevant stories from our backyard are to our daily lives. Just like our elders, these stories are at risk of being forgotten. *Mist Bound*, therefore, isn't only about one man's dream of using stories to save his father's memory.

The book itself represents the hope that, like Alexis, our children will preserve our regional stories and cherish the boundless ideas, inspiration and wisdom they contain.

Michael Jackson's Thriller revolution turns 40

MIXING rock, pop and RnB like never before, Michael Jackson's *Thriller* – which marked the 40th year of its release yesterday – became the most successful album of all time and defined a coming era with its audiovisual ambition.

Thriller has sold more than 100 million copies worldwide since its release on Nov 30, 1982.

It consecrated Jackson as the "King of Pop" and remains a musical lodestone.

Even renewed allegations of paedophilia in the 2019 documentary *Leaving Neverland* failed to dent his popularity, and Jackson's reach has continued to grow, with his music currently ranked 60th in the world on Spotify with 36.7 million monthly streams.

His influence is still all over the charts, not least in the form of The Weeknd, whose music has channelled Jackson, from an early cover of *Dirty Diana* (2010's **DD**) through to his recent chart-topping album *Dawn FM*.

"Michael is somebody that I admire. He's not like a real person, you know? When I started making

music, that's all I wanted to aspire to, just like every other musician," the Canadian singer-songwriter told *GQ* magazine recently.

Much of the magic on *Thriller* is thanks to producer Quincy Jones, who had worked with Jackson on 1979's *Off The Wall*.

"The record company didn't want Quincy for *Off The Wall*. They took a dim view of this producer from the jazz world – music that sold peanuts in the eyes of the industry," said Olivier Cachin, author of two books on Jackson.

But the collaboration saw sparks fly – literally on one occasion.

"When we were finishing *Beat It* ... we were working five nights and five days, with no sleep. And at one point, the speakers overloaded and caught on fire!" Jones recalled to *Rolling Stone*.

Threatening MTV

Thriller was the moment when Jackson started to pull in influences from across pop culture, with Eddie Van Halen's hard rock solo on *Beat It*, and pop ballad *The Girl is Mine* with Paul McCartney.



Thriller has sold more than 100 million copies worldwide since its release on Nov 30, 1982. – **AFP**

There were pioneering rap rhythms on *Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'* and a sample from Soul Makossa by saxophonist Manu Dibango (who got a large pay-out after Jackson's team failed to secure authorisation).

Initially, the record failed to break

on to the newly established MTV channel, which refused to show the video for megahit single *Billie Jean* on the grounds that black music did not "fit" with its white-dominated rock programming.

The boss of Jackson's parent label at CBS, Walter Yetnikoff, "threatened

to publicly denounce MTV as huge racists and block their access to videos of rock artists in its catalogue," said Cachin.

Yetnikoff won that battle but then found himself clashing with Jackson over his plans for a US\$1 million (RM4.48 million) video for the album's last single, the title track *Thriller*.

Jackson wanted to work with director John Landis, having loved his movie *An American Werewolf in London*, while Yetnikoff thought the plan was pointless when the album was already at number one.

"But Michael had a vision, and he was stubborn," said Cachin.

The resulting 14-minute mini-film premiered at a Hollywood cinema before a star-packed crowd and helped re-energise sales of the album.

Not only did it see Jackson turn into a werewolf and bring the living dead out of their graves, but it launched a whole new branch of the music business – extravagant and ambitious videos that came to define the next two decades of pop culture. – **ETX Studio**