

SUNDAY VIBES

BROUGHT TO YOU BY LIFE & TIMES

Love in a book

This Malaysian author drew inspiration from his late father's struggle with dementia for his award-winning story, writes **Elena Koshy**

WHEN the idea of a children's book first hit Daryl Kho, he ran to his father, Eric Kho, to tell him how he was going to write a story where the elderly man's granddaughter (Daryl's daughter) was going to gather the ingredients for Eric's cure. A fairy tale, no doubt. But one that rang achingly true for Daryl.

Dementia was a land where his father lived. It wasn't who he was. I think of it as a far-off place, like the Acropolis or Mount Olympus, or in Daryl's colourful imagination, Mist, a realm where fabled creatures like mermaids, imps and fearsome monsters roamed. A place where beloved and ancient fairy queens and kings ruled; where linear time doesn't exist, and the rules of society are laid aside.

Thinking of it this way allows magic to happen — for his father to recognise Daryl and to know his granddaughter — and for there to be a boundary between Daryl and the treacherous drop of despair. Each time he went to see the ailing man, it was different. Daryl learnt to set expectations aside, like an umbrella on a sunny morning.

On that day when Eric was told of Daryl's wondrous new book project, he was lucid enough to smile and remark that there should be an elephant in his story. Curious, Daryl asked, "Why an elephant? Because you need elephant glue to glue back your memories?" Still smiling, the older man replied, "No. Because elephants never forget."

And that's how Bakus, a strange elephant-like creature who lives in the farthest reaches of Mist, came to exist in *Mist Bound: How to Glue Back Grandpa*, and his father's poignant line found its way into Daryl's award-winning book.

"Ah my princess", Yume tells Alexi the protagonist as they say their goodbyes, "Haven't you heard? Elephants never forget."

In 2009 — shortly before the birth of Daryl's only child — Eric had suffered two strokes, which brought about the onset of vascular dementia. The strokes took away his mobility and independence, whilst



Daryl Kho

Daryl wished that his daughter had shared the same kind of relationship with his late father, as depicted in 'Mist Bound'. WALL ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARTIST SILLIEJELLIE

dementia robbed him of his many memories and much of his personality. As Eric made Dementia his permanent abode, his wife (Daryl's mum) took on the role as his primary caregiver without complaint.

In Dementia, as in all places, there's the actual suffering, and there's thinking

about the suffering, which is optional and ill-advised. Daryl's mother was adept at following this advice.

She accepted what happened in a sanguine way common to her generation. "I spent time feeling sad," recalls Daryl, adding: "But I spent more time feeling awestruck by the strength and resilience she

exhibited throughout dad's illness."

Deeply moved by his mother's sacrifice and grieving over his father's condition, Daryl put pen to paper and began creating a world where grandfathers and granddaughters shared an unbreakable bond, and where dementia wasn't irreversible, but could be cured with a little faith, hope and love. Line by line, Daryl's pen flew and *Mist Bound* slowly took shape.

But Eric never got to read Daryl's labour of love. While living in Dementia wasn't the defining chapter of his life, the terrain there ran inexorably downhill. In 2018, the older man passed away peacefully. Devastated, Daryl almost abandoned his project, but finally decided to see it through. "Grief did that to me. I knew I just had to finish it so I wrote like a madman!" he says softly.

Mist Bound was finally published last year. Inspired by his father's affliction and his mother's courage, Daryl's debut novel swept all of Singapore's major children/youth book awards this year. It was awarded the Hedwig Anuar Book Award (HABA) by the Singapore Book Council, given biennially to Singapore's most outstanding children's middle-grade book.

Mist Bound also won the 2022 Singapore Book Award for Best Young Persons Title (ages 7-18) presented by the Singapore Book Publishers Association. The book was also the finalist for the Singapore Book Awards' Book of the Year Award and won the public's vote on gaining a place in the Top 10 Reader's Choice books.

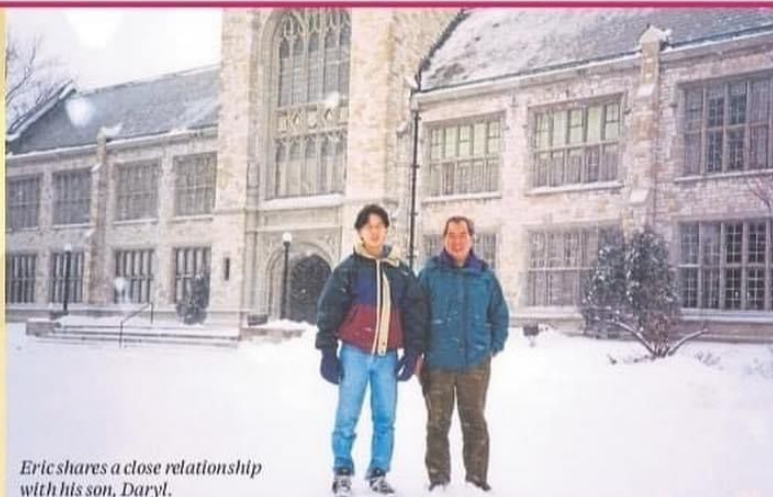
Finally, *Mist Bound* was nominated for the 2022 Crystal Kite Award, presented by the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), a global non-profit organisation.

Mist Bound was on Times Bookstores Singapore children's best-seller list for 26 weeks, and on MPH Malaysia Young Readers and Kinokuniya Malaysia's Kids bestseller lists for over 10 weeks; among the few local or regional books on all lists. Daryl was also named Times Bookstores' "Author of the month" in November 2021.

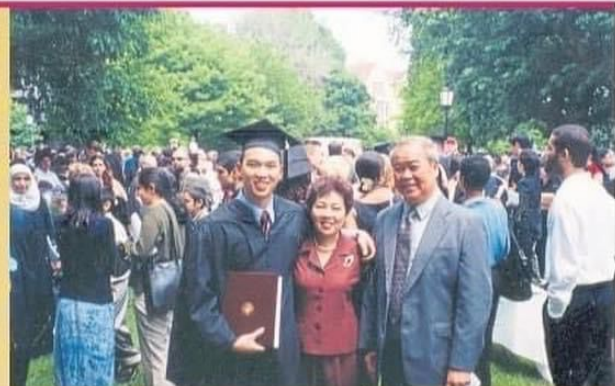
TURN TO PAGE 2



Daryl Kho's award winning book.



Eric shares a close relationship with his son, Daryl.



Proud parents on his graduation day at the University of Chicago.

A magical journey with dad



Eric Kho (centre) was a loving father who will sacrifice anything for his children.



Receiving the Hedwig Anuar Book Award (HABA) from the Singapore Book Council. (PHOTO BY EDWIN YEO)



Family portrait back in 2015. (PICTURE BY GLANCE STUDIO)

FROM PAGE 1 TIES THAT BIND

It isn't easy to read *Mst Bound* from the screen. But as I scroll through the pages in rapt attention, I find myself missing the pleasure of turning the page and running my fingers across the beautiful illustrations that help bring Daryl's story alive.

Like Eric, Grandpa's memories have been shattered, no thanks to an angry imp or *kenit*, who blamed the old man for destroying his house. Knowing it is her fault for accidentally falling into the imp's home and not Grandpa's, Alexis must now race against time to gather the ingredients for the "memory glue", which can bring her grandfather back again.

She journeys into a magical land called "Mist", where fantastic creatures straight from her grandfather's stories — from an evil *duyung* (mermaid), to the treacherous *nangmais* (tree nymphs), nasty *onis* (snow ogres) and nightmarish *kuderas* (smoke horses) — are alive and ready to stand between her and the precious ingredients that can only be found in this strange world.

With Alexis are two of the unlikely travel buddies: the short-tempered *kenit* (who zapped Grandpa in the first place)

lives forever.

When I finally meet the Singapore-based author over a Zoom video call, I find a kindred spirit of sorts waiting for me from the other side of the Causeway. He's surprisingly self-deprecating, his eyes widening in surprise and relief when I tell him I enjoyed his story. "Thank you for reading the book," he says, before adding: "It really means a lot to me."

I soon have to chuck my expectations of this being yet another ordinary interview. For one, we find ourselves veering off course by talking about food and the great debate about whether Singaporean food is better than Malaysian food.

For another, Daryl's more interested in asking me questions than answering mine. "You're a lot more interesting than I am!" he protests with a grin. I then spend another half hour answering his barrage of questions. It looks like he has done his research on me just as I'd done mine.

It takes a while before we get back on course again. We talk about our fathers and find we have much in common — grief, guilt and love that bind us to our father's memories. Both our dads passed away in 2018, just before they turned 75. And we still

he remarks quietly. And I nod wordlessly.

"Dad and I were very close," he begins, adding: "But it all began with me fearing him when I was a young boy!" Daryl was a typical rambunctious boy while Eric was the quintessential traditional Asian father who wielded the *rotan* to discipline his son.

"Dad always said caning me hurts him more than it hurts me, but at that time, I thought it was a load of rubbish!" he recalls, chuckling. One day, the young boy had the bright idea of collecting all the *rotan* and feather dusters in the house and hiding them.

The next time Daryl got into trouble, he thought he had outsmarted his father — until the older man went to the toilet and pulled out the water hose. "I had the thrashing of my life!" he says dryly.

As Daryl grew older, his father gradually mellowed and they grew closer over time. "He loved his children too much. When the *rotan* stopped, he started spoiling me all the time," he recounts, smiling.

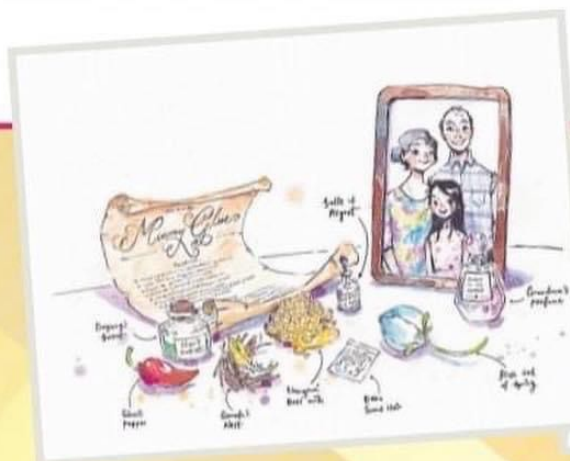
His father would purposely go out to buy Daryl his favourite food for breakfast or lunch. "He was always there for me whenever I needed him," shares Daryl, recalling that his father would take him

and aspirations.

His father told Daryl that he'd wanted to study botany because he had a special love for plants, but Eric's parents had other plans and didn't want him to go down that path. "There's so much of parallels that I could see happening in dad's life and mine. Dad didn't want me to pursue writing because he didn't think that would pay very well!" he muses.

His love for botany led Eric to spend much of his time gardening and tending to his beautiful flowers. When Daryl told him he wanted a fish pond, his father dug up his beloved garden and laid down cement to build one for him. "That was how much he loved me. I'll never ever forget that gift," says Daryl softly.

In *Mst Bound*, Grandpa was a botanist, who'd take Alexis for long walks. Daryl smiles at my comparison and nods. "There's so much of him that I put in the story. Making Grandpa a botanist in the book was a way of making my father's dream come true. The walks were the highlight of my life as a young boy and it was definitely something that I was going to include in the story," he agrees, before adding wistfully: "These are the things



The Ingredients needed to make Grandpa's memory glue.



Alexis caring for Grandpa in 'Mist Bound'.

MIST BOUND: HOW TO GLUE BACK GRANDPA

AUTHOR Daryl Kho

PUBLISHER Penguin Random House SEA Pte Ltd

349 pages

Available at all major bookstores.

AT TUNNEL'S END

Eric's first stroke hit during one of the happiest moments of his life. He was shown the sonogram of Daryl's unborn child when his son had come down from Singapore. That night after dinner, he had a stroke.

On the morning before the stroke, Eric had taken his son to his favourite coffee shop. "We had a big plate of soy sauce chicken and *siew yoke*. That big meal, I feel, led to his first stroke. I can't help but think that it was my fault," his voice grows heavy with emotion.

A few months later, Eric suffered a more severe stroke after falling in the bathroom that left him semi-paralysed and bed-ridden. Vascular dementia then suddenly made its dreaded appearance.

"One day, he was just gone," recounts Daryl softly. "In an instant, dad's memories disappeared." His father was in a state of delirium and one of the first things he asked his son was, "Is the boat coming? I'm waiting at the jetty..."

"That didn't make sense at all," he recalls quietly. "But I put those lines in the book. It's one of the first things that Alexis' grandpa says when he loses his memories. The reality was much worse for me. It felt that my father had died without passing away."

About three months later, Alexis (Eric's only grandchild) was born. To Daryl and his family, the birth of his daughter was the light at the end of a very long and dark tunnel. "She was the hope for a new beginning. That's why her Chinese name is RuiQing. It means the first flower buds of spring. In this story, this is one of the ingredients for the

memory glue to bring Grandpa's memories back," says Daryl.

When Daryl's daughter turned 5, Daryl moved his parents to an apartment. In the midst of packing his old things, he came across some of his old writings that he did while he was in college.

"A lot of things were happening at that time. For one, I was going through a career slump, a mid-life crisis and was feeling depressed. When I was seeking for meaning, I discovered this one-time passion of mine and something clicked," he recalls.

He remembered the glory days of writing songs, poems, plays, skits and even a kung fu musical when he was a university student. But it had all stopped once he joined the workforce. Gradually, his creative tank dried up. Now, reading all his past works sparked something in him. Why not write again?

Daryl had also been reading stories to his daughter every night, and that gave him an idea to write a story where his daughter would be the main protagonist in helping her grandfather regain his memories. "I didn't have to look too far to get a story," he admits, smiling.

NEW INSPIRATION

The first draft was easy, recalls Daryl. He finished it in a burst of inspiration in a span of just six months. "...but it stayed a first draft for six years," he admits sheepishly.

Seeing my incredulous face, he continues: "I hired an editor and the manuscript came back to me full of red ink. There was so much to do, but with a full-time job and raising a family — I know, all excuses — the

draft remained just that — a draft for six whole years!"

It was no longer a source of inspiration, he readily admits, saying that the journey to a published book was littered with edits, rewrites and frustration.

It remained in that state until his father passed away in 2018. "I realised I put it off for too long," he says regretfully.

Adding, he says: "He was the inspiration and I'd wanted to read it to him when it was done. When my father passed away, I almost gave up. It was too late. I mean, what's the point now? It felt like a kick in the pants, to be honest."

What kept him going was the fresh outpouring of grief and guilt. "The last time I came down, I'd planned to spend some time with him, taking him for his walk. But I'd gone to a party the previous night and woke up with a hangover the next day. I left without spending time with him, thinking that I'd do that the next time I come home," he reveals heavily. His father passed away before Daryl could make it down for the next trip.

There's a lot of regret, he says, his voice cracking. "Firstly, for being the cause of his first stroke, and secondly for not being able to say a proper goodbye." His voice trails off and he sits in companionable silence for a short while. I understand his guilt. When my dad died, I remember well the intense guilt I had in the months and years that followed.

The book then became a chance to make up for his guilt and a way to process

his grief. "I decided I'm not going to wait for inspiration. I'm going to treat it like a job with targets. Every lunch, I'd go off to a cafe and start writing. Writing then became my escape and solace," he recalls.

His daughter became his cheerleader, and challenged him to write it within a stipulated time. For every week he didn't finish a chapter, he'd have to pay her S\$5 (RM16). "I've managed to avoid paying her!" he tells me with a laugh, adding: "But she's given me some ideas that I've put in. For example, she used to call moisturising lotion, 'monsterising lotion' and that's in the book!"

His mother — who's the real hero, according to Daryl — is featured alongside his daughter. "To me she's the definition of love and marriage, being there for my dad for worse, for poorer and in sickness, not only just continuing to be there after his strokes but loving him and fighting for him even more fiercely than ever after it struck," he says, adding: "Those are the qualities you'll read about grandma in *Mist Bound*."

The book reminds us that the stories that linger longest, that move us most profoundly, are often the ones that come from how we process deep sadness and love. "Myths and stories are how we've made sense of the world for as long as we've been wandering the planet," says Daryl quietly.

Beyond the fantastical tale, Daryl has gifted his family with a legacy of endurance and an understanding of the magic powers of storytelling to provide both solace and transcendence. Grandpa Eric will continue to live forever between the pages of Daryl's *Mist Bound* and in the memories of those who love him most.

elenafnst.com.my

