

# +plus

**DEALING WITH THE RAUNCHY, THE RISQUE, THE INTIMATE AND THE SENSUAL,**

**CYRIL WONG IS SINGAPORE'S**

# POET

# EXTRAORDINAIRE

ONE of Singapore's most prolific poets, Cyril Wong has made a name for himself not just as a writer of verse but as a populariser of the genre — not only taking poems out into the streets and finding a place for them in homegrown films and magazines, but also getting them into the hands of readers overseas.

Besides having his collections published in countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom and holding poetry readings at international events such as the Edinburgh International Book Festival

in 2003, he has also been nominated three times for America's prestigious Pushcart Prize.

The 29-year-old poet, who has been the programme manager for The Substation arts centre for the past three years, is the founder of the international poetry online journal *Softblow* as well as the editor of *The Substation Magazine*.

Wong's latest volume of poetry, *Like A Seed With A Singular Purpose*, is out in major bookstores.

PLUS spoke to him recently about fantasies, sex and, of course, poetry.

**1 You were once asked how your mother could face people in public since you write so much about your family. You responded that the question assumes that a lot of people read poetry. They don't?**

Poetry will always be limited to the 10 per cent of the population that reads. That's just the way it is. Ironically, that's what makes poetry special. But I also remember a time when whole countries read poetry, when it used to rouse people to revolutions.

But I don't think that's relevant any-

more. To rouse people, it takes more than words now.

Poetry can also be a place for people to explore language to its limits, to the point that poets are often the guinea pigs for other writers.

**2 A lot of your writing deals with sex: The raunchy, the risque, the intimate and the sensual. Why's that?** It's not so much that it's about sex, but that it's high time these things should be circulated and talked about.

Be it poetry or prose, we need to open

our minds. More Singapore writers need to be writing more explicitly in order for more local publishers to be daring enough to take on such projects in the future.

**3 Can poetry really be sexy?** Of course, it can be sexy. There are many examples of this kind of poetry throughout history. But people have to take time to appreciate the sex in the poems. It's not straightforward sex. If it were, it'd be porn. It's just one other way of looking at sex.

**4 Your writings tend to be personal to the point of revealing the very intimate, from the act of making love to your relationship with your parents. Why put your personal life under the microscope in your poetry?**

I wouldn't have done it if not for the other poets I have read such as Sharon Olds and

**OUR PRIVATE LIVES ARE THE ROOT OF OUR ACTIONS. IT MAY NOT BE SOMETHING PEOPLE CAN TALK ABOUT OR MAKE A FILM ABOUT, BUT IN POETRY, PERSONAL MOMENTS ... CAN BE POTENT. IT IS VERY NAKED, BUT THERE IS NO VALUE TO VULNERABILITY IF IT'S SO EASY.**

Dennis Cooper. I never thought I would have had the courage to talk about myself, with myself.

Poetry gave me the courage to show people how I did certain things, redeeming the personal to tell stories — only the stories are true. By "redeeming the personal" I mean trying to encourage people to put their personal lives on paper. A previous Poet Laureate of the United States, Mark Strand, wrote that "the masterpiece is the private life".

But it isn't sensationalising or dragging out the personal, like my rough and abusive relationship with my father. It's about learning from it — saying: "If not for these things in my life, I wouldn't be like that" — to make it a bigger human response.

Our private lives are the root of our actions. It may not be something people can talk about or make a film about, but in poetry, personal moments like these can be potent. It is very naked, but there is no value to vulnerability if it's so easy.

**5 When and how did you start writing poetry?**

It was during my time in the National Service, where they give you this crappy little notebook. So, I wrote verses about missing my friends and my home and about my future. It was a very thoughtful period for me, partly because it was so boring.

That was when I realised that I liked to break up my lines to emphasise certain words or ideas.

Doing further research into that took me to Singapore poet Prof Edwin Thumboo. He was extremely encouraging, not like a father but more like an uncle that I met once or twice but learned so much from.

**6 Your latest collection of poetry is an attempt to document the frustrations and contradictions of everyday existence. What are some of the frustrations and contradictions of being an artist in Singapore?**

Well, for example, living in Singapore, we're all reasonably middle-class and comfortable. Yet, there's all that discrimination and homophobia that still exists. Then there's this country's perpetual drive for success.

But if not for this, how could we afford the luxury to do art? Or how hard do we bite the hand that feeds us?

If not for that hand, Singapore would be a different place. Or how to tell that hand that there are problems with the ways this country is developing.

In my book, I imply that people have different ways of finding happiness, that it

isn't so straightforward. But you also cannot impose your way on others.

**7 You told the press you were burnt out in 2003 — "nothing in the bank anymore" — but you still tried to write and get your poetry out there. What drives you to keep writing as a poet, even if the vault might seem empty?**

What motivates me is talking to people. I also get a lot of material from being on moving vehicles such as planes, buses and trains. Being in the air does something to me. It's not about being in another country, but it's the six hours en route that gets my poetic mind going.

In 2003, I took time off to write less but to explore more, through dance, film ... I like such explorations, like taking a holiday from working the same muscle in my head. Work out until so big also for what, right?

**8 Do you really live across the street from a neighbour with whom you had a physical relationship while writing your latest collection?**

Yes, I did live across from him. But no, we didn't have a physical relationship. It was just a fantasy I had. It was very awkward, our windows were just facing each other and I lived there. I've since moved.

**9 Give us your take on the Singapore poetry scene. Are our poets a bitchy and backstabbing lot, as a recent press report suggested?**

No lah, all the cliques are debris now. We've all moved on, partly because every-

one is so busy with their own lives.

Before, yes, when we were less busy with our careers and families, we seemed clique-ish, we went to the same events together, that kind of thing.

But the scene is diversifying, with things like the poetry slam and all. Of course, there is that tension between poets and the slammers, but if they're successful at what they do, that's fine.

**10 What's the future of Singapore poetry?**

A lot of the young writers are very reclusive — and I like that. There's more of a desire to develop the craft than to be seen. They're just doing their thing and I can't wait to snap up their first volumes when they come out.

They really are a very promising lot, all girls though, like Koh Tsin Yen, Grace Chua, etc. It's strange when I think of it. Before this, it was all us guys: Myself, Alvin Pang, Felix Cheong ...

As an industry, I hope our books will be read. Poet Yeow Kai Chai once suggested that we should put up a sexy campaign to get people to read local literature, say, by making Fann Wong the face of the campaign. I am just afraid that one day Singapore will just be the place where we live.

Our books will only be appreciated by readers abroad while Singaporeans just wait for the umpteenth collection of doggerel by celebrity writers.

What do you feel about the state of Singaporean poetry? Email us at [plus@newstoday.com.sg](mailto:plus@newstoday.com.sg)

## SEED OF CREATIVITY

THERE'S something different about the somewhat familiar poems in Cyril Wong's *Like A Seed With Its Singular Purpose*.

They're familiar in their focus on themes of family, art, eroticism and homosexuality — longstanding features of the poet's work — and yet they reveal a Wong who is less angry in his approach.

The title suggests a return to the poet's roots and the seeds he planted with his earlier work.

Wong's latest poetry collection is far-reaching in its subject matter, from his thoughts on attending an exhibition by fellow artist Amanda Heng about the Japanese Occupation in World War II to his painful relationship with his often harsh father.

And then there's a whole section devoted to sex — wet sex, sex with a neighbour, sex

with a person other than your spouse. The list goes on.

In the poems in this part of the book, Wong departs from his usual style by producing verse that verges on prose.

These works give the reader a breather from the four earlier, more conventional sections.

There is a last, rather interesting section filled with sentences that all start with "If".

Conditional statements such as "if only, as if" and "if my self is a shadow, at least I made a dent in the light" fill this part of the book, which works for the most part, but occasionally stumbles.

Fortunately, this minor misstep isn't likely to rob readers of the enjoyment to be gained from a book which, similar to the seeds of its title, is bursting with life.



ten  
questions  
one  
+ newsmaker

OOI BOON KEONG