

Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship

Curious about the National Library's Lee Kong Chian Fellowship? Find out what our fellow, Mrs Adeline Foo, has to say about the fellowship and how her research has benefitted from this opportunity.

NL: Could you share what led up to *The MRT Diaries: One boy's quest to learn what it means to be Singaporean*; and *A game, a girl and a bird named Mani*?

Adeline: I'd heard about the Singapore Memory Project (SMP), I think it was in early 2013. I thought I could write a book that answered a few difficult questions, the same ones that I faced from my three kids such as "What makes us Singaporean? Is it by virtue of the country we are born in?" Yes, the obvious answer. But there are also aspects of living in Singapore, and knowing these intimate ins and outs of a way of life that makes us Singaporean, or rather, identify us as one. The quirks, the traits, the jokes, the worries, anything that only a Singaporean would get. I thought, if my kids ask these questions, then there might be many more who would like to know the answers.

So I approached Gene Tan, who was heading the SMP, and he put me in touch with his section, and together, we developed the idea to have a minor character from *The Diary of Amos Lee* feature in this new series — two books came out of our discussions, in late 2013 and 2014.

The "MRT Diaries" is an acronym for "My Random Thoughts...", a journal for scribblings, observations and so on. Then I realised "MRT" could also be a device to send this boy through the heartlands to collect stories, insights, gossip and bits of observation from spying on people. And the name stuck.

NL: Could you tell us about your current research?

Adeline: I'm researching the lives of two cabaret women who were founders of a Chinese primary school in the post-war years; the school was called The Happy School. It was something I came across when I was doing my research for an assignment in my MFA studies a few years back. This Lee Kong Chian research fellowship has led me to delve deeper into the cabaret world associated with a small group of women who were ostracised because they chose a promiscuous way of making a living. So from an innocent whim to read about the two founders of Happy School, I got sucked into listening to hours and hours of people talking about the allure of dancing, music and booze, and of accounts of gangsters and pimps ruminating about the past, and their dramatic lives; but they also point out the sad state of women who were being exploited in the cabaret world.

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NL: How has the National Library's collection helped you in your research?

Adeline: The Oral Records were insightful, as were the archived newspapers and SG publications that were newly released for viewing. I haven't looked at the periodicals and magazines yet. That's my next target. I'm keen to read up about the lifestyles of these cabaret women, their fashion and entertainment choices, and who their inspired role models of the era were.

NL: Would you recommend this fellowship to your peers and why?

Adeline: Yes, to my writer friends. As a writer, it's a definite way of life to fall back on history and research to supplement what we do, whether in writing fiction or non-fiction. Any form of historical insight would lend weight to a subject. So if my friends have a period of six months to devote to a worthy topic, the LKC fellowship would provide a research platform to support them.

NL: What kind of impact do you hope your Fellowship will bring?

Adeline: I am seriously considering enlarging my research scope. I need to see if my enlarged research — beyond two cabaret women — can form the skeletal framework for an entire book. If published, the book will plug a gap on an aspect of our history that has not seen any publication to-date (the women of the three Big Worlds: New World, Great World and Happy World Amusement Parks who have been whitewashed and swept aside).