

NEW STRAITS TIMES

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Celebrating written and spoken word

By NAVEEN MATHEW MENON

INAUGURAL: The Cooler Lumpur Festival will be an annual, multidisciplinary celebration of art and culture

KUALA LUMPUR: MALAYSIA's maiden celebration of words in all forms, whether written, spoken or performed, will take place from today to Sunday at MAP@Publika.

With the catchy title, The Cooler Lumpur Festival, it will be an annual, multidisciplinary celebration of art and culture. The celebration will see specific themes being adopted to expand the city's cultural horizons and trigger creativity and imagination in society.

This year's festival, backed by the British Council, MINI and Borders Malaysia, presents #Word which will bring together producers and purveyors of words, local and international world-class writers and panelists from an array of creative disciplines.

Some of the prominent people who will make their presence felt include award-winning author of teenage novels Nicola Morgan; Burmese surgeon, writer and human rights activist Dr Ma Thida; Malaysian national laureate A. Samad Said; writer and activist Marina Mahathir; best young British novelist Benjamin Markovits; and well-known journalist and writer Rehman Rashid.

The #Word lectures, panel discussions, workshops, readings, art exhibitions, film screenings, children activities and book fairs are mostly open to the public free of charge.

Topics for these activities will revolve round journalism, literature, film, art, poetry and social media.

One of the highlights of #Word will be the inaugural Poskod Journalism Campus which will bring together leading voices in journalism to discuss about the state of Malaysian media.

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In another first, #Word will play host to the only Southeast Asian segment of the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference (EWWC) which is the largest travelling conference on literature in the world.

There will be three special panels to address questions affecting literature and society, covering topics such as "Censorship Today", "Should Literature be Political?" and "A National Literature".

The EWWC is supported by the British Council, the Scottish government's Edinburgh Festival's Expo Fund, Creative Scotland, the City of Edinburgh Council and Event Scotland.

British Council Malaysia arts and programme manager Grey Yeoh said: "We are incredibly proud to be hosting the Southeast Asian leg of the EWWC here and partnering with the good people at Cooler Lumpur."

The Cooler Lumpur Festival literary director Umapagan Ampikaipakan said: "We realised that it is absolutely crucial for a city like Kuala Lumpur to take a minute and celebrate the written and spoken word."

He said such gatherings were important to ensure "our future growth and development as a cultured and thoughtful society".

#Word hopes to encourage a reading culture, nurture an appreciation of language and improve literacy skills in the country, he said.

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(From left) British Council Malaysia's Arts And Programme Manager Grey Yeoh, Cooler Lumpur Festival's literary director, Umapagan Ampikaipakan, celebrated writer, publisher and independent filmmaker Amir Muhammad, Borders Malaysia, CEO Yau Su Peng, chief operating officer of and BMW Group Malaysia head of corporate communications Sashi Ambi at the press conference. Umapagan Ampikaipakan (right) with co-organisers of The Cooler Lumpur Festival. Pic by Saddam Yusoff

Source: [Celebrating written and spoken word - Central - New Straits Times](http://www.nst.com.my/streets/central/celebrating-written-and-spoken-word-1.304132#ixzz2XsMzA6gT) <http://www.nst.com.my/streets/central/celebrating-written-and-spoken-word-1.304132#ixzz2XsMzA6gT>

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theguardian

- [Ma Thida](#)
- guardian.co.uk, Monday 24 June 2013 16.45 BST

Literature needs freedom – and freedom needs literature.

At this weekend's session of the Edinburgh World Writers' conference in Kuala Lumpur, the eminent Burmese writer – imprisoned under censorship laws for more than five years – used her own experience to reflect on censorship and imagination. This is an edited version of her keynote speech,



Free expression ... South Korean students write birthday messages to Aung San Suu Kyi during a protest against Burma's military regime. Photograph: Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images

As a native of Burma or Myanmar, the title "Freedom and Literature" seemed surreal to us in the recent past. However, for me, literature itself, either creating or reading it, always relates to freedom.

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Literature is a medium which conveys, maintains and appreciates freedom between writers and readers. Compared to other forms of art, it is the most modest, relying on words only. The way it connects people - writers and readers or readers and readers - is through freedom. With a movie, viewers simply follow one scene after another. For example, while watching *Gone With the Wind*, viewers experience Clark Gable as Rhett Butler and Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara. But while reading the novel by Margaret Mitchell, readers can imagine anyone as Rhett Butler or Scarlett O'Hara. The simple sentence "The Sun rises" can be imagined differently by different readers, but a movie scene of a sunrise can only be the same for every viewer. That is why literature is a truly free art form for both writers and readers.

However, publishing is not always related to freedom. In my own country, we had the Press Scrutiny Board for nearly five decades. This censorship board prohibited the publication of some literature. In the early 1980s, it took from one to two years to get permission to publish a novel. Even with permission, there would be much editing. Sometimes writers decided not to publish because of immense and nonsensical editing by the censorship board.

For periodicals at that time, we didn't need to submit manuscripts before printing, but we did need to submit the print copy before distribution. In the early 1990s, the censorship board would ask for the removal of paragraphs or whole short stories or articles from printed periodicals before they were distributed. So we would put black or silver ink over the paragraphs, or glue facing pages together, or rip out some pages. In the early 2000s, the censorship board asked us to submit before printing any form of literature or books, including advertisement pages. Then there were no more ugly magazine pages: all forced editing was completed before printing. Just before the censorship board abolished its process in mid-2012, a weekly current affairs journal would be submitted three times before it was printed and one time before it was distributed. That is why it was impossible to have regional papers in places far from the office of the Press Scrutiny Board and where people from ethnic minorities live. For this reason, media or literature in ethnic languages was almost impossible to establish. This process prohibited not only the freedom of the press but also pluralism in the press.

Investors and owners didn't want editors who were willing to test tolerance or censorship, or take the costly and time-consuming risk of reprinting manuscripts. Some editors refrained from accepting any work which might be censored

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heavily. As no definitive rules were set out by the censorship board, it was sometimes hard to predict what might be censored or not. And since all publication houses need a licence to operate, there were risks in publishing some works: the termination of a licence, going to trial under restricted printing law, being put in prison. Eventually writers were forced to give up the freedom to think and write as they wished. This is what our Burmese literature has been through.

Here I would like to tell my personal story. I wrote many short stories in the 1980s, but because of my political activities and criticisms of the government, my pen name was on the "brown list" and most of my short stories were banned. In 1993 I was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for four alleged crimes, two of which were the printing and distribution of illegal materials. Then I went on the "black list" and all of my writing was banned. Though I was released after 5 and a half years, most editors didn't dare to publish my work and no publisher wanted to publish my books. Furthermore, I couldn't get permission for a media licence. I really wanted to run a news or current affairs journal, but I knew it was impossible. I tried to apply for a licence to run a health journal in the mid-2000s but I didn't get it. And because of the censorship board's heavy pressure, neither did any publishers want me to edit their publications. The press scrutiny board had the power to refuse any works by particular writers publication anywhere by any means. So even though a writer is not in prison, he or she has very limited freedom, not only in creating literature but in publishing it.

In 2011, I was awarded a freedom of expression prize by the Norwegian Authors' Union. But at that time the situation inside Burma was not very good, and I was still working as an editor of literature magazines and writing for many other periodicals. So I decided not to go to Norway and accept the prize, but I sent a video thank-you note to them. Some passages from this may help you to understand more about our Burmese freedom and literature:

What a shame for a Burmese writer who was awarded the prize not to come and accept it in person. The reason is not to save me but to save my 'words' or 'creativity'.

Writing creatively is indeed a very basic need for all writers around the world. However, for us, creativity rests not in freedom but in hunting for freedom. I want the world to be exposed to our creativity on behalf of our speechless people.

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For me, losing the chance to be a writer in Burma is worse than being imprisoned. To keep freedom of expression, I have to create. In other words, freeing the words is more important for me than freeing myself.

For writers, creativity in their writing itself always helps to expand the boundary of freedom permitted by censorship. So for Burmese literature, creativity does not come from the freedom we have, but the freedom we want to have. And for readers, creativity in their imagination helps them to read between the lines, among words or even inside a vocabulary. For Burmese readers, imaginative power is a very basic need – the need to understand or appreciate more about literature. For this, they just need freedom in their imaginative power. Writers, too, do not need to get permission from the censorship board in order to be creative. Writers and readers remain free in their own creative and imaginative power under a period of heavy censorship. In this sense, we can still say literature is an art which holds freedom.

Censorship prohibits only the publishing of literature, not its freedom. The free nature of the creation of literature and its appreciation remains, even in censored works. However, in order to have freedom of literature, we need more than one party to try hard. We need not only governments to abolish censorship, but also investors, publishers and editors to be free from the fear of being at risk, writers to be creatively strong and readers to be imaginatively strong. Therefore, what we – writers – need in order to have freedom both in creating and publishing literature, is also freedom or independence from fear, greed, hate or dependency.

Finally I would like to say this; freedom and literature are mutually interrelated and cannot be separated from each other. We fight not only for freedom but also to keep it in our literature.

- This is an edited version of the keynote speech by Ma Thida delivered on Sunday 23rd June at the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference: Kuala Lumpur, presented by #Word Cooler Lumpur Festival in partnership with Edinburgh International Book Festival and the British Council.

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2013/jun/24/literature-freedom-burma-ma-thida>

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NEW STRAITS TIMES

22 June 2013

Literary fest fun for all

By John Tiong

The #Word — The Cooler Lumpur Festival promises to be cool on all fronts, writes John Tiong.

IN the last decade, there has been a significant shift in the cultural scene in Kuala Lumpur. While in the past, Malaysians spent most of their time in cinemas, watching television or attending music concerts, the last decade has seen a lively literary culture encompassing not only the written word but also theatre and music.

Amir Muhammad, writer independent film-maker and publisher, came out with 40 books in the last two years alone, making his publishing firm Buku Fixi, one of the most active in the region.

And so it is most timely that Kuala Lumpur should have its own literary festival, says festival director Umapagan Ampikaipakan of The #Word — The Cooler Lumpur Festival, a three-day event which kicked off yesterday at MAP@Publika, Solaris Dutamas, Kuala Lumpur.

Award-winning writers such as Tash Aw and Tan Twan Eng, he points out, have put Malaysia on the world map of English language writing. Tash won the 2005 Whitbread Book Awards First Novel Award as well as the 2005 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Novel (Asia Pacific region) for his novel *The Harmony Silk Factory*. Tan won the coveted Man Asian Literary Prize for his second novel, *The Garden Of Evening Mists*, last year.

Malaysians now have their own literary heroes whom they can look up to and this has encouraged many to try out writing themselves, says Ampikaipagan. Cooler Lumpur refers to the way Caucasians pronounced Kuala Lumpur in the old days.

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And, yes, the festival aims to be the next coolest thing on the literary front though the George Town Literary Festival is two years older.

#Word — The Cooler Lumpur Festival is without frills but features plenty — words in all their manifestations be they paintings, films, theatre performances, books, political discourse, reading sessions or lectures.

At the recent press meet to promote the event, Ampikaipakan and Amir even shared a banter about free ice-cream at The Children's Tea Party. Last Polka, the ice-cream maker, will prepare a special literary flavour for the event where theatre groups will entertain children and motivate them to learn language in a fun way. This gesture, in no small way, sums up what the organisers PopDigital, a creative media shop specialising in media and technology, as well as the British Council, Borders and MINI | (British Marque under BMW) want the festival to be — a fun outing for all.

Buku Fixi will launch two books at the festival today. There is also the segment One On One with Amir Muhammad today at White Box between 7 and 8pm. Ampikaipakan says: "It is common for people who are not readers to think literary festivals are not for them because they don't read." He dispels the notion, saying that the festival is structured so that they appeal to everyone and is not intimidating or too solemn. For instance, there are also opportunities to take part in panel talks and contribute ideas about issues in today's society.

Lee Eeelen, a freelance writer, whose short stories have been published by Buku Fixi, says she is looking forward to the festival. She says: "The writing circle is small. It is like meeting old friends and making a reconnection."

She hopes the festival would one day be as grand as the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival or the Singapore Writers Festival. "It is good to have a festival like this as there are many young writers who don't know the the legalities involved in book publishing.

"I am not a lawyer but I have seen enough of the other side of the publishing industry," Lee says. "I wish young writers are more savvy and understand the terms before they sign a contract."

It is through a festival like this that writers can make friends and learn about the trade from each other. Lee adds: "Woody Allen said 90 per cent of the success of

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any chosen field is turning up. If you turned up, smiled a lot and introduced yourself, you would learn something. Writers in general are helpful so it is easy to learn things from them.”

#Word — The Cooler Lumpur Festival plays host to the only Southeast Asian segment of the Edinburgh World Writers Conference, the world’s largest travelling conference on the state of literature with three special panels covering the topics:

Should Literature be Political? — today at Black Box (12.30pm-1.30pm)
A National Literature Today at Black Box (3.30pm- 4.30pm) and,
Censorship Today, Tomorrow at Black Box (2pm-3pm).

The talks aim to address critical questions affecting both our literature and our society.

Visitors can also meet prominent writers such as Malaysian national laureate A. Samad Said, Rehman Rashid, Di Li (Vietnam), Myanmar surgeon, writer and human rights activist Dr Ma Thida and Alfian Sa’at (Singapore).

“We are hoping for quality engagement,” Ampikaipakan says. “If people who come to our talks leave thinking, ‘man, that was cool, that bit blew my mind, I learnt something new today’, for me, that is mission accomplished. We hope the festival will be yet another creative space Malaysians will be proud to call their own. We have the ambition of putting Kuala Lumpur on the world map as a place where ideas thrive.”

Other prominent writers to be featured include the award-winning author of teenage novels and professional speaker Nicola Morgan, Best Young British Novelist Benjamin Markovits, George Washington University journalism professor Janet Steele, social activist and writer Marina Mahathir and the country’s first woman English novelist, Chuah Guat Eng.

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#WORD

THE COOLER LUMPUR
FESTIVAL
21ST - 23RD JUNE 2013



Nicola Morgan

Source: <http://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/literary-fest-fun-for-all-1.304893>

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Celebrate words of all forms at The Cooler Lumpur Festival

Expand your word horizon and cultivate the creativity and imagination with #Word.



It's time to celebrate words in all forms! Catch #WORD from 21st -23 June at Map, Publika. The event is exclusively presented to you by The Cooler Lumpur Festival, British Council, MINI and Borders Malaysia.

The Cooler Lumpur Festival presents #Word, a celebration of words in all forms – be it written, spoken or performed at MAP@Publika. From 21 – 23 June, there will be a series of activities such as lecture series, panel discussions, creative writing workshops, readings, art exhibitions, book markets and even activities for

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children. #Word will cover a wide range of topics from literature to journalism, film to poetry, and from song writing to social media.

Local and international featured writers and panelists at the festival include:

- Writer, publisher and independent filmmaker Amir Muhammad
- Award-winning author of teenage novels Nicola Morgan
- Novelist Benjamin Markovits
- Professor of journalism Janet Steele
- Myanmarese surgeon, writer, and human rights activist Dr Ma Thida
- Poet, novelist and broadcast journalist from Quezon City Philippines Lourde de Veyra
- Prolific writer and activist Marina Mahathir
- Writer, photographer, filmmaker, actor Bernice Chauly
- Prominent Malaysian journalist and writer Rehman Rashid
- Non-Malay writers who write in Malay Uthaya Shankar and Gina Yap
-

#Word will play host to the only Southeast Asian segment of the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference (EWWC), the world's largest travelling conference on the state of literature, with three special panels covering the topics of "Censorship Today", "Should Literature Be Political?" and "A National Literature" - that aim to address critical questions affecting both our literature and our society.

Source: <http://news.malaysia.msn.com/community/celebrate-words-of-all-forms-at-the-cooler-lumpur-festival>

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First Published: 12:40pm, Jun 13, 2013
by Nurul Iman Dimyati



Some of the people at the helm of the festival (from left) Yeoh, Umapagan, Amir, Yau and Shashi.

#WORD is the word in town - this is the catchphrase of the inaugural Cooler Lumpur Festival, Kuala Lumpur's soon to be annual multi-disciplinary celebration of culture. This year the festival presents #Word as Malaysia's first and only celebration of words in all forms.

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Manning the helm of this festival is the Cooler Lumpur Festival literary director, Umapagan Ampikaipakan, who is raring to go all out if the enthusiasm he displayed during the press conference at DoubleTree by Hilton, Kuala Lumpur is any indication.

"We do a lot of online video and stuff, but these have expanded, where it's moving away from just a virtual space into the real space and the festival is something we want to do for a very long time.

"Words, culture, arts and music, that kind of things, we are very passionate about it," he said.

Also present at the press conference was Grey Yeoh, arts & programme manager, British Council Malaysia; writer/publisher/filmmaker Amir Muhammad; Yau Su Peng, COO of Borders Malaysia; and Shashi Ambi, head of Corporate Communications, BMW Group Malaysia.

#Word is doing all sorts of activities to entice the crowd of literates all over Malaysia with a vast numbers of events such as a lecture series, panel discussions, creative writing workshops, readings, art exhibitions, children's activities, and book markets.

It will cover a wide range of topics from literature to journalism, from film to poetry, and from song writing to social media.

"I feel that now is the time for this. We've had various kinds of heroes in the past, but over the last decade that writers have been given this kind of limelight," said Uma on the efforts made in getting young Malaysians authors in showcasing their talents.

"Malaysians finally have literary heroes to look up to and I think that is very important.

"I think there is no better time than now to celebrate literature and literary authors," he said.

The festival itself will have the honour of being the first to play host to the only Southeast Asian segment of the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference (EWWC), the world's largest travelling conference on the state of literature. It will have three special panels covering the topics of "Censorship Today", "Should

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Literature Be Political?" and "A National Literature" that aim to address critical questions affecting both our literature and society.

#Word is set to take place from June 21 until June 23 at MAP, Publika, where people can look forward to amazing line-ups which feature individuals such as award-winning author of teenage novels Nicola Morgan, novelist Benjamin Markovits, professor of journalism Janet Steele, plus local personalities like prolific writer-cum-activist Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir and prominent Malaysian journalist and writer Rehman Rashid.

In conjunction with the #Word festival and the help of MINI (BMW Group Malaysia), a #MINIfiction competition will run between June 3 and June 19 where one winner will be selected every week to win an Amazon Kindle.

The competition aims to connect with Malaysians on Twitter and engage them to tell stories in just 140 characters or less.

Another interesting activity to look forward to in the festival is the Poskod Journalism Campus where issues regarding journalism in Malaysia will be tackled by keynote speakers such as Rehman Rashid and Janet Steele.

Truly, the festival is definitely a first for Malaysians and for those words lovers out there, #Word is beckoning you to join them in the festivities to celebrate words in all its form.

The Cooler Lumpur Festival is a multidisciplinary festival curated by PopDigital where the Kuala Lumpur-centric festival will adopt specific themes each year, aiming to expand the city's cultural horizons, build stronger communities and cultivate the creativity and imagination of people.

The festival was made possible thanks to collaboration with British Council, MINI and Border's Malaysia. For more information regarding the event or activities that will be held, click [here](#).

Source: <http://www.fz.com/content/cooler-lumpur-festival-celebrates-word>

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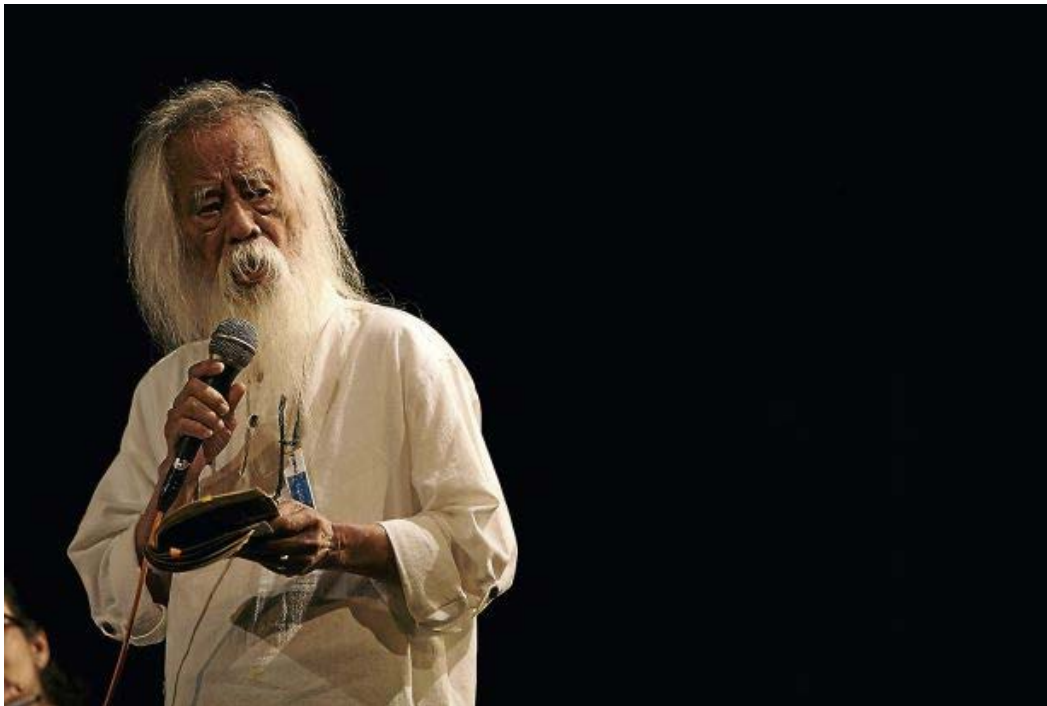




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For the love of words

[BY SHARMILLA GANESAN](#)



Varied programme: 'A National Literature' was one of the panel sessions at the travelling Edinburgh World Writers' Conference, which was hosted by the inaugural #Word: The Cooler Lumpur Festival. The session included Malaysian National Laureate A. Samad Said, pictured. — Photo

The inaugural Cooler Lumpur Festival proved that interest in literature is alive and well in Malaysia.

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THE haze wasn't the only thing in the air in Kuala Lumpur last weekend; if you were in Publika at Mont Kiara, you may have noticed a fair number of words buzzing around too, thanks to The Cooler Lumpur Festival that was held there. The multidisciplinary festival kicked off its first-ever incarnation with the theme #Word, intended to be a celebration of words in all their forms, be they written, spoken or performed.

Curated by PopDigital in collaboration with the British Council, MINI (yes, the car!) and Borders Malaysia, the theme of the three-day festival meant that there was a definite literary bent to the proceedings, from the presence of authors, lectures and panels on literature; book launches; readings; pop-up bookstores; and even book-themed ice cream flavours (sold by "queens of ice-cream", The Last Polka).

And most hearteningly, the event attracted about 2,700 people – a real achievement for a country that is so often said to have a dismal number of readers.

Needless to say, the festival's literary director, Umapagan Ampikaipakan, was thrilled.

"#Word went far beyond our expectations. I went into this not knowing how Malaysians would react to a festival that was inspired by 'literature'. We aren't a reading population and I had absolutely no benchmarks to gauge how a KL population would react to #Word. Some of our literary panels had 100 people in attendance! That isn't just great by Malaysian standards, it's great by any standard," he explains.

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The diversity of the crowd, he adds, is another reason to rejoice.

“We had hipsters, we had academics, we had young parents, we had older people, it really was quite the mixed bag. That kind of engagement for me was absolutely crucial.

“Now, I’m not getting ahead of myself. I am in no way convinced that Malaysians are suddenly readers. I’m just excited with the progress, that Kuala Lumpur is ready for this kind of festival. Heck, if you build it, they will come!”

And come they did, especially since there seemed to be a bit of something to satisfy most literary tastes.

The variety of panel sessions ran the gamut from fashion writing and music journalism to Malay literature and cultural identity.

“New Malay Literature: The Changing Face Of The Malay Author” provided insight into why authors like Uthaya Shankar and Gina Yap have chosen to write in Bahasa Malaysia, with Singaporean playwright Alfian Sa’at being an interesting counterpoint as a writer of Malay descent who uses both English and his mother tongue in his works.

The “On Identity & Culture” panel proved to be a lively one, with Malaysian author Chuah Guat Eng, playwright Huzir Sulaiman, American writer Rishi Reddi and Thai author Wipas Srithong each providing different takes on notions of identity. Interestingly, despite the often-touted advent of globalisation, the panellists seemed unconvinced that a “melting pot” of cultures is taking place, saying that the world still remains a factionalised place.

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The panel on “Malaysian Noir: The Real And Unreal In Crime Fiction”, meanwhile, was both insightful and entertaining, as authors Shamini Flint, Brian Gomez and Rozlan Mohd Noor, together with film critic Johanan Sen, dissected why crime fiction is often a way to talk about contemporary issues by couching them in a “mainstream” guise.

Chalking up another first, #Word also played host to the Edinburgh World Writers’ Conference (EWWC), the world’s largest travelling conference centred on literature, with three special panels being streamed live over the Internet from KL (see story on page 14).

Alongside these panel discussions were a series of lectures tackling various facets of the literary world by various prominent authors, such as one on reading and the brain by award-winning teen fiction writer Nicola Morgan, on publishing by local writer and publisher Amir Muhammad, on censorship by Alfian, and on freedom and literature by Burmese surgeon, human rights activist and writer Dr Ma Thida.

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'New Malay Literature: The Changing Face Of The Malay Author' was one of the panel sessions at the lit fest with the session including (from left) writer Uthaya Shankar, moderator Umapagan Ampikaipakan, playwright Alfian Sa'at, and author Gina Yap. — PopDigital

Budding writers, meanwhile, were given the opportunity to hone their craft in workshops by Morgan and Benjamin Markovits, one of *Granta's* Best Young British Novelists of 2013.

The festival also highlighted the performative potential of words, through events like film screenings, a ghost story session at midnight by Patrick Teoh and Jo Kukathas (which attracted a whopping 350 people!), spoken word performances, and readings. Livening up the proceedings was a special children's programme by Borders Malaysia, #Word Junior.

With #Word's success, The Cooler Lumpur Festival is set to become an annual fixture, and Umapagan shares that the organisers already have a theme for next

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year in mind: #Fast, because the event is scheduled from June 20 to 22, 2014, the weekend before the start of Ramadan.

“We want The Cooler Lumpur Festival to be a ‘third weekend of June’ festival. Mark your calendars. We’ll be here, every year,” he says.

Source: <http://www.thestar.com.my/Lifestyle/Books/News/2013/06/30/For-the-love-of-words.aspx>

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What they're saying

AWARD-winning British author and professional speaker **Nicola Morgan** says she will be part of a panel on censorship and free speech at #Word: The Cooler Lumpur Festival. It will see her imparting tips on writing for teenage fiction; she will also talk about her fascination for the reading brain.

“The workshop will be for writers wanting to write for teenagers, since my own novels are mostly for this age group and I have written much about the teenage brain.”

Morgan’s book *Blame My Brain* published in 2005 was shortlisted for the prestigious Aventis Prize; she’s also won two Scottish Art Council prizes for her other work.

“I’ll also conduct a lecture that touches on digital reading and the differences between fiction and non-fiction in terms of reading and the brain,” Morgan says in an e-mail interview.

She is especially excited to be at the festival, as she has never been to Asia and considers it an honour to be invited to another country.

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“I’m really looking forward to experiencing different people, ideas, food and climate. And to be at the very first #Word is hugely exciting,” she adds.

With some 90 books and a slew of awards to her name, Morgan has this advice for budding writers hoping to get published: that they must be writers first and only think about being published later.

“Writers need to practise using their talent. When you think about becoming published, understand the market and the industry. Publishing is easy but selling books at a profit is hard.

“I had many years of rejection before I had my first novel published – and the reason was that I hadn’t yet written the right book or written it well enough. “So, be businesslike, be determined, be brave, be aware, but first be a writer. Write the first draft with your heart and the second with your head,” she shares. Morgan opines that the first draft is a combination of inspiration and perspiration, but the rest requires an attempt at objectivity by the person about his/her own work.

Having written both fiction and non-fiction stories, Morgan says the two genres are totally different.

“I like writing non-fiction because it’s easier, while fiction is more satisfying and special,” she says.

Her current projects include a (non-fiction) guide to teenage stress, to be published next year, and two novels for children.

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Meanwhile, prominent local publisher **Amir Muhammad** says this festival, if anything, creates a nice excuse for authors to come out and party, especially as most of them are solitary individuals who work in isolation.

“Given that this is its inaugural year, I don’t really know what to expect.

“But I’m definitely excited, and hope it can become bigger next year.

“It’s always hard starting out and staying consistent after that,” says Amir, who will be part of a panel on publishing.

He adds that he will be launching his six short series online called *Futura*, as well as a newly-published book by one of his writers.

“I hope and look forward to meeting nice people at the fest.”

Source: <http://www.thestar.com.my/Lifestyle/Books/News/2013/06/16/What-theyre-saying.aspx>

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No child's play

BY SHARMILLA GANESAN



British author Nicola Morgan, who writes both teenage fiction and non-fiction on young people, was in Kuala Lumpur recently for #Word: The Cooler Lumpur Festival. - Cheem Photography

An award-winning British author shares the challenging realities of writing young adult books.

PERHAPS what makes Nicola Morgan so skilled as a writer of teenage fiction is her refreshing candour. As much as the British author believes in being honest

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when writing for her readers, she also believes in being open about the practical demands of what she does.

“If I were to actually plan out my career, I would not have done it the way I have. I would definitely like to sell more books than I currently do!” she shares, at a recent interview during the #Word: The Cooler Lumpur Festival, for which she was brought to town by the British Council.

This is admittedly a tad surprising, coming from Morgan, given that most people would consider her to be an accomplished young adult (YA) author in her own right.

A graduate of Cambridge University, where she studied classics and philosophy, Morgan was a teacher for 16 years. She first made her mark in teenage fiction in 2002 with the critically acclaimed *Mondays Are Red*, a Faustian tale of a teenaged boy who wakes from a coma to find a sinister creature inhabiting his mind.

Morgan has also published many non-fiction books, including the internationally acclaimed *Blame My Brain* in 2005, which is an examination of the teenage brain.

She continues to beguile readers with the unusual stories she spins, each markedly different from the other. *The Highwayman’s Curse* and *The Highwayman’s Footsteps* are historical fiction set in Scotland, while *Deathwatch* is a thriller about a 14-year-old who is being stalked but doesn’t know it.

Her novel *Sleepwalking* – set in a dystopian future where language has been killed – was named the Scottish Children’s Book of the Year in 2004. Meanwhile, her last novel, *Wasted*, about a boy who makes his decisions based on the flip of

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a coin, scooped up the same honour in 2011, and was also long-listed for the Carnegie Medal.

“I’d like to think that my books are deep and interesting,” Morgan says when asked what each of her stories have in common. “I try to put in a good story and an intensely emotional tug.”

Yet, it is exactly this ability to pen singularly unique storylines that seems to keep her from reaching the heights of success that some of her peers have.

“Publishers need to sell many more books now. And readers are more conservative than we’d like them to be; typically, most of them stick to something familiar. So publishers bank on books that sell, like series or trilogies,” Morgan says.

“Writers like me, who write serious, stand-alone books, are difficult to sell. None of my books set out to fit into any particular type, they’re all based on an idea that came into my head that I’d like to write about.”

There’s no denying, though, that the market for YA fiction has been booming over the last decade or so, with an increasing number of adults also buying the books. Morgan points out that there is much to be attracted to in these books.

“Most people want a story that gets to the point fast without a lot of self-indulgent waffle, which is what YA books do. That is not to say many of them don’t have lovely, descriptive passages along the way, but with adult novels, it does seem sometimes like they are more for the authors than the readers,” she says.

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Writing for young people, she adds, also allows a more open approach.

“Teens are coming into discussing big issues, but they are also coming to it fresh, and much more open. It is a lot easier to explore interesting issues and unusual concepts, but without moralising, when writing for them.”

Despite the growing glut of fiction catering to teenagers, however, making a name as a YA author may actually be more difficult than one imagines.

“We keep hearing that the YA book market is growing, which gives the impression that it is easy to publish and sell these books. That is not true. What everyone hears about are the big successes, like *Twilight* (by Stephenie Meyer) or *The Hunger Games* (by Suzanne Collins). On the other end of the spectrum, we have the ones that no one has heard of. There’s almost no middle ground anymore,” says Morgan.

She goes on to admit frankly that she wouldn’t have a problem with being labelled as more commercial.

“I wouldn’t say no (to becoming more commercial), I’m not proud that way. It’s just that I don’t have any idea how to do so.” she says. “There are ways that you can come to a compromise without being a sellout; for example, by being very deliberate about writing for a boys’ or girls’ market, or by consciously planning a series. I’ve tried to write that way, but the words just don’t come out.”

In the meantime, Morgan is in the midst of working on another non-fiction title, a teenage guide to dealing with stress. She is also trying her hand at a children’s series.

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When writing for teens, Morgan’s biggest guiding principle is to “stay invisible”. “The most important thing is to keep yourself, your morals and your messages out of it. Too many people think they have something to teach, but teens will spot that a mile off, and run away,” she says.

“No matter how successful your books, within and outside the teen market, you do have to stay true to the fact that you’re writing for the young person.”

Source: [http://www.thestar.com.my/Lifestyle/Books/News/2013/07/07/No-
childs-play.aspx](http://www.thestar.com.my/Lifestyle/Books/News/2013/07/07/No-childs-play.aspx)

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