



LETTRES DE MALAISIE

La Malaisie à travers les livres...

Lettres de Malaisie: After two successful editions, the GTLF is back and we're already growing impatient... Can you feel the pressure building up as we get closer to the opening date? How are you coping?

Bernice Chauly: The pressure is building, as is the excitement! It's ten days away now and I'm hoping that everything will stay on track. We had four cancellations last year, so fingers crossed that everyone shows up! I am not having sleepless nights yet, but I do dream about the fest. It's very strange as scenarios are repeated again and again and I wake up thinking that it's already happened.

This year's theme for the festival, *The Ties That Bind*, is a reference to the unifying links we may have to a place, a language, a community of people, but also to the shackles that sometimes tend to deprive us of our freedom... How relevant a theme would you say it is for today's Malaysia and for the current literary world in general?

I think it's a very relevant theme for us right now, and I especially chose two indigenous writers because I wanted them to address issues that are not often openly talked about. Also, I think it's a theme that is always relevant in the literary world because it looks at a sense of 'belonging', of coming from a sense of 'place' whether its real, or imagined, or factual, or a place from within. We all write because we are driven to tell stories of a particular place and time, and it's the context of these real or imagined spaces that give rise to some of the great writing that we will get to experience this year.

After A. Samad Said last year, you have chosen Lat as your guest of honor for this year. What does Lat represent for you personally?

Lat is so iconic for many Malaysians, and he was an indelible part of my childhood, growing up in Ipoh. Lat is a wonderful storyteller, and to put words and pictures together in a way that was so accessible, funny and real, lent to some very precious memories. Inviting him was a shot in the dark, because I didn't really know if he would say yes, but after two months, (I can be very persistent), he finally agreed. He says his days of 'going out and about' are over, so we are really very fortunate to have him at the festival.

For this third edition, many internationally acclaimed names of Malaysia's literary scene will be present: Lat of course, but also Sharmi Flint, Preeta Samarasan, Tash Aw and Tan Twan Eng, whose books have already been translated in many different languages. Are you trying to "bind some ties" between Malaysian writers, many of them living abroad, and their Malaysian reader base? Would you say it is needed?

It's always nice to have Malaysian writers come together, regardless of whether they live near or far, but we are also at a point in time where so many of our writers are being internationally celebrated for their work, so to have them all in one festival is quite a treat. Of course there are issues that surround their reasons for living abroad, and this will be a topic for one of our discussions in the festival.

Among the foreign writers who have accepted your invitation, there's a refreshing variety of backgrounds and origins, with writers from the US, from Canada, Europe, Australia and Asia of course... How hard is it, as a festival's curator, to gather such a varied and talented panel of writers every year?

The curating takes months of work, and it's painstaking as we are a very small festival, so the selection process is not easy. I am very fortunate because I participate in many festivals worldwide so I get to meet a lot of writers, but putting a list together takes time. One of my primary visions of a festival this size is that it's also about exchange - that we really get to spend quality time with other writers, to discourse, exchange ideas and to get to know each better so that we leave with lasting memories and friendships.

After the writers are confirmed, then I have the task of creating the panel discussions and naming them. I only choose names that are song, film or book titles or memorable phrases. Hence, this year I have a session called "The Horror, The Horror" which is from *Apocalypse Now*, and last year I had sessions called "Imaginary (Home)lands" which was a book by Salman Rushdie and "The Mind of the Malay Author" which was written by Muhammad Haji Salleh. I also have a session called "Infinite Possibilities" this year - which was a popular catchphrase for a good while. So it's fun creating the names of the panel discussions and then I have to find the right fit of writers - of who goes where and who moderates. So knowing the writers and their work plays an important role in this part of the process, which then takes weeks to plan and programme.

You yourself are a prolific writer of prose and poetry, and you have recently taken part in two other Asian festivals, namely the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival and the Singapore Writers Festival. What do you think are GTLF's strong points in comparison with those two events? And in which areas can it still learn from them?

These festivals have been around for many years, so there's always something to be learnt from them. The most distinct aspect of our festival is that it's small and very intimate. Both the SWF and UWRF had almost 200 participants this year. They're both large festivals with hundreds of events and take place over many days. In contrast, we have 30 participants this year - including moderators - and about 30 events over three days. It's a manageable festival, it works with the demographic of George Town. It works with the size and scale of the heritage site and our venues. Most importantly, it works with the budget that we have. Another aspect of the GTLF is that it celebrates world literature, and this is why we have writers who perform in multiple languages.

Your latest collection of poetry, *Onkalo*, was recently published by Math Paper Press (Singapore, 2013). Will we have the pleasure to hear you read a few lines on stage during this festival?

As Festival Curator, I think I will have to do my job as best I can. There will be plenty of other opportunities for me to be heard as a poet.