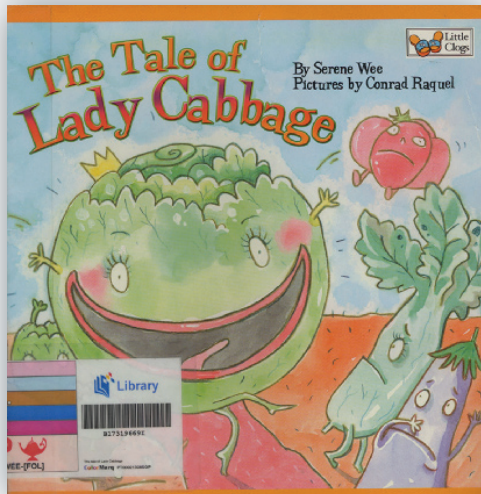
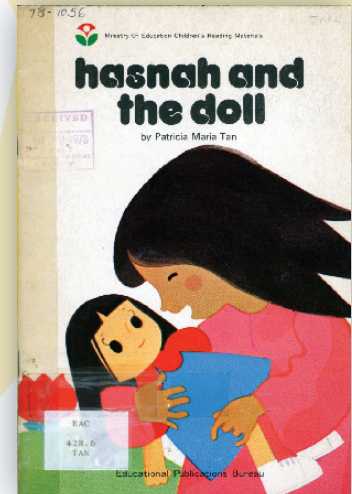


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Singapore as a Centre for Asian Children's Books

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FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS, the National Book Development Council of Singapore (NBDCS) has been organising the Asian Children's Writers and Illustrators Conference (ACWIC). The 6th conference was held this year in Singapore from 5 – 7 June. The main objectives of the conference are – to celebrate children's books, provide access to children's literature with Asian content and promote writing and publication of Asian children's books. Although ACWIC's focus is Asian, its primary objective has been to promote Singapore children's writers and to establish Singapore as a centre of children's books with Asian content

ACWIC's objectives are laudable for books help to develop children's imagination, their curiosity and sense of wonder, spontaneity and creativity. Books that children read and are exposed to when they are young help to define who they grow

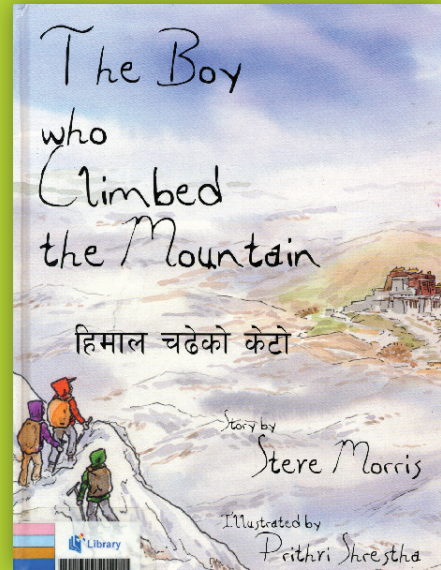
up to be as the literature they read influences their interests, their goals, perhaps even their choice of professions. Local books especially, help children to identify themselves and their unique landscapes. It is therefore important to promote and sustain the art of reading in general and local books in particular, amongst our children. This should be a loving obligation for every responsible parent, committed teacher and librarian.

With the commitment and sustained efforts of the National Library Board (NLB), NBDCS and other agencies, children in Singapore have developed the habit of reading. The library loan statistics indicate that children account for approximately 30% of library loans, although they make up only 14% of the library membership. However, most children survive on a diet of foreign children's literature written by

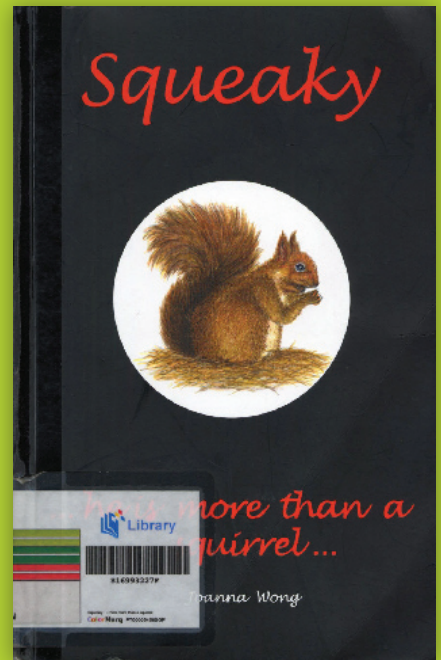
authors such as Roald Dahl, Enid Blyton, Nancy Drew and J K Rowling. This should come as no surprise as children go for what is easily and readily available. Of the 8,000 to 10,000 children's titles published in English worldwide, only 40 to 50 titles are Asian in essence. Not only are there few titles published, even those that are in the market are not well known. For instance, how many remember, let alone read, the once famous Singapore children's titles in the Mooty series by Jessie Wee or Patricia Maria Tan's *Hasnah and the Doll?* What about more recent books? Has anybody read Serene Wee's *Little Clogs* or Devaki Nair's *Larry in School?* The ignorance of local titles amongst our readers exists despite efforts both by NLB and NBDCS to promote them. The NLB has issued several bibliographies, but the two entitled *Singapore Children's Literature* and *Celebrating Childhood in Asia* are particularly outstanding. NLB's publications are annotated and they should be referred to in our pursuit to introduce books that our children can more easily relate to. If we do not proactively write, publish, promote and introduce Asian children's literature to our children, we will remain a community raised and influenced by Western stories and tradition.

Among the variety of reasons hampering the development of Singapore children's literature is the lack of awareness of the critical need and value of such books for our children. This results in very little attention being given to works by Singapore and Asian writers. Publishers are reluctant to publish them and if they do, the promotion and marketing of such titles aggressively is lacking. And of course, the reading public is reluctant to read fiction that is home based. This is a vicious cycle that could only be broken if all parties concerned focus on the challenge and take steps to aggressively promote books by Singapore authors and develop an appreciation and a readership for them.

First, Singapore publishers should encourage Singapore writers to use the Asian tradition as basis to spin and craft stories for our children rather than focus on importing foreign books or translating western stories to local languages. This is possible as there is ample content in Asia to form the basis of good stories and books. Asian traditions, myths, legends and culture are rich in scope and variety and can provide sufficient material and inspiration to Asian writers. Publishers should publish books with Asian content not only for Singapore but for Asia as well. It is estimated that there are more than one billion children below the age of 12 in Asia. Publishing for Asian diaspora and the wider international market will make publishing of children's books even more worthwhile and more importantly, viable. Shirley Lim's *Princess Shawl* was recently published in Malaysia only after publishers in Singapore failed to see its potential.



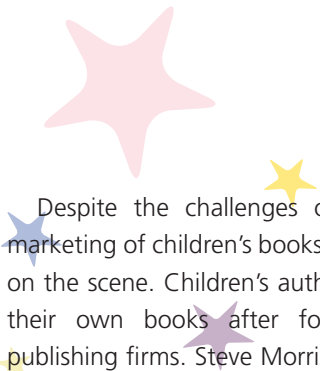
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Despite the challenges of publishing and marketing of children's books I see a silver lining on the scene. Children's authors are publishing their own books after forming their own publishing firms. Steve Morris's publishing firm, The Lotus Bloom published his children's book, *The Boy Who Climbed the Mountain*. Shamini Mahadevan published her Sasha series through her company, Sunbear Publishing. Joanna Wong recently published her children's book *Squeaky...he is more than a squirrel*. The 2nd volume in the series has just been issued.

The recent programme organised by the Media Development Authority (MDA) and the Book Council since 2006 called "First-Time Writers & Illustrators Publishing Initiative" has been very successful in discovering and nurturing new children's writers. For the past two years, more than 300 children's stories have been submitted for the competition. Of these, 23 have been published. Nine of them have been made into animated films. They have all been showcased at the Frankfurt Book Fair. Lee Jin Pyn's *The Elephant and the Tree* has been sold for distribution to international markets. What all these indicate is that there is no lack of children's writers in Singapore. What is lacking is aggressive and entrepreneurial publishers willing to invest and take risks to publish and market children's books.

Hence, what is needed is more support in the form of seed capital for publishers to publish children's books. In addition, educational agencies, librarians, teachers and parents should be encouraged to use works of Asian writers in their daily encounter with children and make every effort to promote local works. With sufficient funding, marketing and promotion support in the next few years more children's books will come off the press from the Singapore publishing firms. Sustained promotion and effective marketing will attract a wider readership of Singapore and Asian children's publications not only in Asia, but also in the other parts of the world. This will help towards a deeper understanding of Asians and their way of life. In time to come, we may have an Asian Harry Potter in the making and Singapore would be firmly established as an international centre for the publication of children's books with Asian content.