

ABOUT BOOK DEVELOPMENT

by Hedwig Anuar, former Chairman, National Book Development Council of Singapore

What does Book Development mean?

The term book development was coined by Unesco to cover the myriad range of people, processes and skills which go into the making and reading of a book. At the start, the writer conceives and writes the book; the illustrator, book designer and editor add their contribution before the work goes to the printer who produces the physical object; the publisher provides the capital and the expertise for all these stages and is also responsible for the marketing and promotion of the book through advertisements, book reviews and other means. The book is distributed mainly through the bookseller who sells it in his bookshop or to institutional buyers such as libraries and schools in order that it reaches its final destination - the individual reader.

Unesco Promotion of National Book Development Councils

In the mid-1960s, Unesco held a series of regional meetings in Asia, Africa, the Arab States and Latin America to assess long-term book needs and assist in working out national policies and strategies to overcome the book hunger in these areas. It was at these meetings that Unesco also encouraged the formation of national book development councils which could play a key role in promoting and coordinating all areas of book development activity in harmony with overall national development.

Inauguration of the National Book Development Council of Singapore

Educationalists, publishers, printers, booksellers, librarians and authors, together with the government officials from the Ministries of Education and Culture, met for the first time in November 1966 to discuss the problem of book development in Singapore.

A major outcome was a recommendation urging the Ministry of Culture to take the lead in establishing a National Book Development Council. Another was the formation of the Singapore Book Publishers' Association (SBPA) in May 1968. Headed by Donald Moore, it started with 12 members and increased its membership to 29 in its first year.

The Council was finally registered as a non-profit society on 19 December 1968 and formally inaugurated on 13 February 1969 by the then Minister for Culture, Mr Jek Yeun Thong, with 12 members representing government and non-government educational, cultural, publishing, printing, library and bookselling associations and institutions. Its place of business was designated as National Library and its first Hon. Secretary was myself. Thus the Council was born with official government blessing and given government support through ad hoc grants for specific projects.

Objectives

The Council has two broad objectives:

- 1) To promote and encourage the reading of books amongst all sections of the population in Singapore for the purpose of education, information and culture
- 2) To co-operate and liaise with all members of the national and international book world.

Singapore Book Fair

The Council organised its first promotional event, the Festival of Books and Book Fair, in June 1969 in conjunction with the 150th anniversary of Singapore's founding. The Festival theme was: 'Read More Books'.

The Festival of Books and Book Fair was organised by the Council on its own for the first three years. A major change took place in 1972, which was the International Book Year, when the Council and the Singapore Book Publishers' Association (SBPA) became jointly responsible for the event.

In March 1983, both the Council and the SBPA formed a joint venture company registered as the Festival of Books Singapore Pte Ltd to run the Book Fair and undertake other reading promotion activities.

Promotion of Reading

In its first decade, the Council's promotion activities were held mainly during the ten-day Festival of Books and Book Fair. They include storytelling; drama and puppet shows; quizzes; drawing and painting of book jackets, charades and costume competitions; film shows based on books; poetry and story readings, forums, talks and lectures. Most of these events were held at schools and libraries or at the Book Fair itself.

The Council held its first National Reading Month (NRM) in 1982 with the theme 'Read with Your Child'. It was jointly organised with the National Library from 1988. Programmes for children, teenagers and adults were provided in Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English.

Development of Book Professionals and the Book Industry

Much of the Council's work is concerned with the development and upgrading skills of book professionals, including publishers, illustrators, editors, translators, booksellers, and librarians. National and regional seminars, workshops and courses have been jointly organised with their respective associations and sponsorship provided for their attendance at national, regional and international seminars and courses.

The Council also sponsored the formation of new associations such as the Society of Singapore Writers, the Association of Book Designers and Illustrators, and the Society for Reading and Literacy, which is the national affiliate of the International Reading Association.

Promotion of Singapore Authors and Literature

One of the major incentives to excellence in writing and authorship was the presentation of the Council's Book Awards since 1976. These were made every two years for the best works of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and children's books written by Singaporeans or permanent residents in each of the four major Singapore languages and published in Singapore or abroad.

A Singapore Literature Prize for the best unpublished works of fiction and poetry/drama (in alternate years) in English was launched in 1991 sponsored by Singapore National Printers Pte Ltd and EPB Publishers Pte Ltd and organised by the Council to provide incentives, including publication, for creative writing in English by Singaporean writers. These included S\$10,000 for the Award, S\$5000 for a Merit Prize and S\$1000 for a Commendation Prize.

The Future

Countries which have already reached high levels of literacy and reading are trying their best to ensure that reading will continue to thrive in the midst of countless other new leisure attractions and newer forms of media. The death of reading has been forecast many a time with the advent of radio, television and the Internet. But regardless of the newer forms of media, the future knowledge of society will ultimately depend on the ability to read, and to read with intelligence and discrimination.

The Council will continue to work on priority areas such as greater involvement in the support of Singapore writers, research into areas of book development and to realize our vision to develop Singapore as the Asian centre for publishing and the literary arts. *ImaginAsia*, an umbrella term for our programmes and events, is a major effort to raise the profile of Asian authors and that of Singapore writers in particular. Eventually, we hope to develop a deeper awareness and appreciation of Singapore and Asian writing in the global literary community.