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Sustaining Singapore's stories

Edmund WEE

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SUSTAINING SINGAPORE'S STORIES



Edmund Wee of Epigram Books considers the importance of local literature and his commitment to nurturing local storytellers.

“You have a nation that hasn’t been brought up on reading stories,” concedes Edmund Wee, Founder of Epigram Books. “Here, people don’t talk about books. When they do, it’s usually a foreign book.”

Edmund is the sort of patriot a country needs but doesn’t always appreciate. Critical of bureaucracy and the Government’s regimental approach to building an appreciation for local literature, he has devoted the last few years of his work to broadening our national narratives and revolutionising the novel-writing environment for Singapore writers. His publishing company, Epigram Books, now offers the most prize-money fiction writers can be awarded in the country. In 2017, the prizewinner will be awarded \$25,000 — five times the amount of the biennial Singapore Literature Prize offered by the National Book Development Council of Singapore.

Edmund is candid about his difficulties. He worries constantly over cash flow and funding has been denied multiple times. His age — he is 65 years old — makes it difficult to secure bank loans and national grants. Despite these herculean stumbling blocks, Edmund manages to make light of his situation. “My wife says I’m a reckless man. I don’t know where the money will come from, but I know it’s important for us to keep at this.”

At the time of our interview with Edmund, we’d already spoken to several other small business owners, many with their own battle scars. Yet there is something striking about Edmund’s plight: here is a man serving the nation in a monumental manner but caught in an endlessly thankless position. We ask him for his take on service excellence and Edmund pauses. “We’re not a new industry. We’re not cutting-edge. We’re not high-tech. Book publishing has been around for donkey years but it hasn’t been properly done in Singapore. I just want to do it well!”



You left The Straits Times to open your own design studio and then eventually to Epigram Books. How did that happen?

I was Design Editor when I left The Straits Times. I didn’t think I could move any higher so it was time for a new career.

Why must somebody stick to one career anyway? People do, of course, but for me, 20 years is long enough. So I left The Straits Times to start Epigram Design when I was 40 years old. At 57, I won the President’s Design Award and felt like I had reached the top of that profession.

Coincidentally, we had already started trade publishing then and had just published “The Diary of Amos Lee”. It was quite successful but everything, from the cost of printing to editing and designing, was borne by Epigram Design. We set up a



separate company, Epigram Books, to get a more accurate picture of whether book publishing was viable as a business.

And is it?

We know now it’s not very viable. We’ve done it for about six years and it’s very tough. We’re losing money. We survive practically from month to month. I still sell books at bazaars, you know? I’m the boss but I work on weekends: selling and carrying books all the time.



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”**

So why do you keep at it?

Because it’s important that we have books — how can we be a nation where we don’t read stories about ourselves? Local art and stories are intrinsic to the soul of a nation; it’s part of the ways in which a nation can bond. Can you imagine if all we watch in Singapore are Hollywood movies, and all the art we see is just western art? People want to read their own stories and Singapore’s the only exception where the best-selling book is a foreign book. Why am I doing this? I don’t know. I love books, I love my country, and I think things are not being done properly.

As a publisher, you primarily serve two groups of people: the readers and the writers.

The whole thing about publishing is that the publishers can never be famous. You must make your authors famous. You must make the books famous. You must brand the authors, not yourself. Like J.K. Rowling — do we know who publishes her books? We know Harry Potter, the characters, and the author, but not the publisher.

I believe good service is about making your customers feel special. So the way we do it is to make a book feel special by looking special. We want readers to look at a book and know the publisher has not taken them for granted. They know we’ve made an effort to make the book look good.

There is also an element of service in how we make sure a book is done properly. It’s hard to make money in publishing so most people cut corners by not having editors, using cheap paper stock, and not investing in design. I understand why others are doing what they’re doing — they need to survive. But, if I were to do all those things, I won’t be doing justice to the writers and the stories being told. The industry standard would remain the same.

So we don’t cut corners. We have full-time editors and designers working for us, and we even have our own marketing team. We publish stories that we think are relevant to people’s lives in Singapore; books with insights to what’s going on here. We try our best to work with authors to make their manuscript better. It’s a process. We serve the writers in a way that is beneficial to them.

Is that why you doubled the Epigram Books Fiction Prize value? Because you see Epigram Books serving local writers and the industry here?

It’s very simple. The biggest prize in Singapore for writing a novel is the Singapore Literature Prize: \$10,000. It’s awarded every two years so, basically, the winners get \$5,000 a year. What is \$5,000? You can’t even live on it, you know, and yet the Government wants to promote literature.

I got so fed up I decided I would create my own prize. Doubling the prize money came about because after the first year, we got feedback from people that it wasn’t fair and that the other finalists should get something. Before we started, few novels were being published. Now, because we’ve started the prize, we’ve published about 15 titles in two years. People are writing. People want to write about their country. People want to write Singapore stories.

I am not a hero, and I’m not doing it for the money. I think we’re doing something very important for the country, which is, unfortunately, at great expense to my own financial health. ♦