

[Theme Music]

## INTRODUCTION TO BACKLOGUES

[00:00:07]

**Serene:** Welcome to Backlogues, an Arts Management podcast series where we delve into the histories and evolving practice of Arts Management in Singapore. The world of arts management is a vast and wide-ranging one, and this podcast series is a humble attempt at beginning to map this world and chart this world. This pilot series focuses on the management of the theatre and literary art worlds, a process that brings texts to the stage or page. It also focuses on the time period of the 1980s to 1995, an exciting time for the local arts ecosystem because of the crucial work of the arts managers in the increasing professionalisation of the arts and cultural industries. Head to our website at [backlogues.sg](http://backlogues.sg), that's B-A-C-K-L-O-G-U-E-S dot S-G for more information and resources.

## INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT-SETTING FOR THE THEMES TO BE COVERED IN THIS EPISODE

[00:00:26]

**Charlene:** I am Charlene Shepherdson, taking over from Serene Chen to dive into the literary arts half of this year. The previous episodes hosted by Serene, took us through some of the key movers in the theatre scene during these decades, which included policymakers, festival administrators, and production managers working in theatre companies. Through these conversations, we noticed how all our guests' career paths intertwined at various points, forming this symbiotic network that we refer to as the arts ecosystem. It's clear to see that an entire ecosystem is required to enable the arts to thrive. Apart from artists, you need the infrastructure and the people who keep the infrastructure going, but also people who work in ancillary services.

This is evident in the literary arts, which is more than just the lone writer at the desk. You need the publishers, agents, booksellers and librarians who work to promote authors and develop a culture of reading. While the arts manager in the literary arts context was not a clearly-defined professional role during the 1980s, this episode, as well as the next, provides critical contextual background on the literary arts ecosystem.

In particular, we will spotlight the people behind the ancillary systems required to sustain the literary arts. For this episode, we shine the spotlight on Hedwig Anuar, one of the most prominent driving forces of the literary scene for her role in promoting, developing, and shaping the public libraries in Singapore, as well as being a founding member of the National Book Development Council of Singapore also called NBDCS. Today, it is known as the Singapore Book Council.

To share more about her role, we have R. Ramachandran and Michelle Heng. Let me give you a brief introduction to both of them. So, Mr. R. Ramachandran, whom I will call Mr Rama from this point onwards; he has a very long relationship with Hedwig Anuar. He was a trained librarian who first worked with Mrs Anuar to develop Singapore's National Library. And over the period of the years, he has also taken over some of her roles as well. Between 1996 to 1998, he was a director of NLB. Between 1998 to 2004, he took over as a chairperson of the National Book Development Council of Singapore. And in 2005, he became the Executive Director of the National Book Development Council of Singapore, 17 years after Mrs Anuar retired. Hello, Mr Ramachandran, it's nice to have you here today.

[00:02:48]

**Ramachandran:** Hello, thank you so much.

[00:02:52]

**Charlene:** We also have Michelle Heng, who is currently a librarian at the Lee Kong Chian reference library, where she has been for the past 12 years. Just before that, she worked with the National Library Board as an independent researcher for two years. Hi Michelle!

[00:03:06]

**Michelle:** Hi Charlene, nice to see you again.

## INTRODUCTION TO HEDWIG ANUAR'S ROLE IN LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR SINGAPORE'S MODERN LIBRARY SYSTEM

[00:03:07]

**Charlene:** Yes! Now Michelle's quite special to us in this episode because she also actually helped to handle the Hedwig Anuar donor collection in 2016. So she has a rare preview to Mrs. Anuar's numerous libraries and books during that process.

So, let me give the listeners a brief history of the library system in Singapore. Although the entity we know as the National Library Board, or NLB, was formed on 1st of September 1995, its history goes further back to 1823 when Sir Stamford Raffles proposed the idea of establishing a public library in the colony and in 1845 it opened to the public on a monthly subscription basis. Over a century later in 1953, philanthropist Lee Kong Chian donated money towards the establishment of a free public library. This entity evolved into the National Library of Singapore in 1960, with the Old National Library Building at Stamford Road, before expanding into the suburbs with branch libraries. It was in this pivotal year - 1960 - that Hedwig Anuar became the first Singaporean to be Director of the National Library, a position she would hold for more than two decades.

Hedwig Anuar, was born in 1928 and in 1952 joined the University of Malaya library as a library assistant. In 1955 the institution granted her a scholarship to study library studies in London, after which she was sent to the Kuala Lumpur branch of the University of Malaya to establish the library there, before her appointment as the director of the National Library.

Anuar was a trailblazer in many ways. At the time of her appointment there were few librarians who were non-expats. Being the first Singaporean Director, Anuar recognised that there were not enough books to reflect local life and not enough books in different languages. Her goal was to make sure the library served everyone equally well, and be the first reference library in SEA. She established the Book Selection Policy Manual which took into account: Singapore's 4 major languages, as well as readers' age groups, literacy levels, purpose of reference, among other factors.

So that was a lot about Hedwig Anuar. But I would just like to know - Mr Rama - because you met her yourself, When did you first meet Hedwig Anuar? And what were your impressions of her?

[00:05:27]

**Ramachandran:** Yes, I was a teacher before, a teacher-librarian. So the transition to a library was quite.. quite easy. But when I first joined the National Library, which was 1969, I went and saw Mrs Anuar. I was always interested in library work, and therefore I was a teacher-librarian before. And I joined the National Library as it was a growing institution at that time. And it grew to the level it is now today. And when I first met her, I was into reference services, but she very clearly said her policy is not to get first-timers involved in reference services, but in public service. And public service is the one that really... you really must know, because ultimately the public library services need to be expanded and the community comes to the public library, not so much the reference library. So therefore she emphasised the public library system. And she said, "you'll be posted not to reference services", as I felt that I should, because as a graduate, you felt that you must be in reference services, but she directed me to the public library services, and that's her strong point, because in that I came to know that her emphasis was in public library services at this point of time. Not reference services, which was elitist, but public library services, the normal, and that was very important because, she was, I think in that sense, she followed the American system where the American system was public library services and public library services were regarded as *[the]* people's university, you know, everybody can go, everybody can get informed. And therefore in that sense, she gave me a right direction in the very beginning to go to public service services.

[00:07:37]

**Charlene:** Okay. So based on what you're saying, what was Hedwig Anuar's vision of what a librarian should be or how should they interact with the community?

[00:07:45]

**Ramachandran:** Yes, I think her main intention was... though she was in, in, in qualification... although she was an academic librarian, she turned Singapore into a public library service. So the National Library, it's only at that point, a National Library, but actually it was essentially a public library system. Because reference, I believe, was, was a small part of the National Library System. So the public library system was very important for her. And that's why for her, the public librarian is also to interact with the public service and also with all the community involved, with the politicians, with the funders, with everybody. So therefore, she understood the public librarian and therefore she became a very important source of information to library services in that sense.

[00:08:42]

**Charlene:** Thank you so much for that, Mr. Rama. Michelle, how about you? Like when was the first time you heard of the name Hedwig Anuar?

[00:08:48]

**Michelle:** Yeah, well, I first saw a photograph of Mrs. Hedwig Anuar, along with her sister Marie Bong and a friend. It was in a yearbook that my sister had brought home. It's the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus School annual magazine. And, um, I recall seeing that photograph because underneath was a caption that read "Our first BA graduates", so I guess this was in the early 1950s. In that yearbook, they showed archives of the pictures of the first graduates, and I was very impressed because I guess I had a deep hunger to learn how to read, and I looked up to her. And I've got a poem here written by Mrs. Hedwig Anuar in the yearbook, the 1983 yearbook, which is available in our eResources page at BookSG. So here goes:

"Reflections On Doing Homework", first written in 1948 and republished in the 1983 yearbook.

"To do, or not to do, that is the question. Whether it is nobler in the mind to regain the smiles and favours of a despairing teacher, or to bring on an onslaught of threatening words and quaking face one's doom, to sigh, to rest no more. And by rest to say, I am the headache and the thousand nagging puzzles that wreck my brain to the consummation devoutly to be wished."

So, as you can see, she was very witty. Her early writings, of course, were parodies of the literature that she read. This obviously, Shakespearean. One of the first memories that I had also was that I used to read news articles about AWARE and how she was a founding member. And she had donated a large collection of her personal documents, including documents from AWARE and photographs as well. And what really impressed me was that apart from how she advocated for rights in Singapore, women's rights, I also saw that she made concrete steps to make the lives of many women better. She was part of The Society for Reading and Literacy (SRL), and she initiated a program called Women Learning English (WISH). So The Society for Reading and Literacy members ran this program by teaching homemakers, illiterate in English, to read and speak functional English so that they would be able to read signs, engage in basic literacy, to asking questions and talking to shopkeepers.

So this program apparently was very successful and satisfying. So successful that by, I think maybe two decades later, it was no longer necessary because more and more people already knew English. I was impressed with that because my own parents cannot read and write in English. And to this day, my mother cannot read MRT signs and has to memorise the MRT stops. So I was very impressed by what she did and what the members of SRL did.

[00:12:02]

**Ramachandran:** And two things, I think she said, it's very important. One was the wittiness part of it. The wittiness I remember. as a personal account, later on in my life, when I was transferred to reference services, and then as I was going out, whenever, when you're transferred, you have to go and see Mrs. Anuar because she will then let you know what to do in reference services and so on. And then she told me, the girls at reference services are not for lone, but they are only for reference, that was the extent of her wit, you know? And she was very witty. And then the other mention, Michelle mentioned, The Society for Reading and Literacy, she formed the society, and she formed the major part of the NBDCS, Book Council. And therefore she was able to form The Society for Reading and Literacy, society of many things. And then they became an international member of NBDCS, which was connected to, to the Book Council and the library as well.

[00:13:08]  
Theme Music

## DEVELOPING THE NATIONAL LIBRARY INTO AN ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC LIBRARY WITH NEIGHBOURHOOD BRANCHES

[00:13:17]

**Charlene:** I think something that you both have mentioned is how Mrs. Anuar was very interested in trying to make the library more accessible as well, and you both kind of alluded to that. Could you share maybe, Michelle, I think you have a personal anecdote as well, about how the library became a very accessible place for you growing up?

[00:13:33]

**Michelle:** Yes. So actually I grew up borrowing books from Queenstown Public Library, as well as Bukit Merah, and I was very grateful growing up because, as I mentioned, my parents are illiterate and I was able to access as many books as I could because our library has a wonderful collection of children's books, and many other books as well. And more importantly, I think Mrs. Anuar and her early group of staff, as well, which is a legacy that's continued today is that there were many reading programs for children, I recall Mr. Rama reading to us in Queenstown Public Library, and storytelling sessions. We were able to access the world of children's stories that were not accessible to us, especially those of us whose parents were unable to read to us. And I recall that as I progressed through the different reading stages in my life, I think by the age of 14, I was reading about 200 books a year under Dr. Lionel Ho, who was also... she was part of the research fellows, I think at that time, who did a research program tracking our reading habits. So Mrs. Anuar and her staff were very, very instrumental in the, I would say literacy programs, as well as studies to find out the reading habits of Singaporeans, especially important in society at that time, and even now.

[00:15:08]

**Ramachandran:** I just want to pick up on two points that you made about Queenstown. Queenstown was the first library that was built, and I always remembered having joined library service recently in 1969, and standing there and watching how the Queenstown Library developed. And when I, at, at, at the beginning, she wanted, the Queensland Library was opened by none other than the Prime Minister. So that was very important because she wanted us, the librarians, to know that it's very important to involve the politicians and Lee Kuan Yew was very interested in library services and that helped us to develop the library services much more. And then the... the other thing you mentioned was children's books. She emphasised not only children, but she emphasised young people as well. And it was her, at that point in many libraries all over the world, there were children services and adult services, there were never young people services, but she picked up this idea from the Americans' libraries, America had young people services, and she was able to copy the American system here in Singapore. And that was very, even now, young people services have been treasured and flowered.

[00:16:34]

**Charlene:** Yeah. And if I recall correctly as well, like the young people's service, when it was started, it was also around the same point of time where she started the school libraries as well, right?

[00:16:41]

**Ramachandran:** Yes, that's right.

[00:16:42]

**Charlene:** And that's partly what drew you to this role that you're doing now? Maybe just a bit of context for our listeners, as Mr. Rama pointed out, Queenstown Community Library was actually



the first branch library that was opened in 1970. At that point, they aimed to have a new branch every one to two years. So the next one was Toa Payoh Community Library, which opened in 1974, followed by a Bukit Merah in 1982, Ang Mo Kio in 1985, Bedok also opened that same year, that was my home library. Yeah. And then followed by that, we also had Geylang East, as well as Jurong East in 1988.

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**Ramachandran:** The importance of the libraries is that it... the branch libraries is that it sort of went to the community where the libraries were... where the people were. So that's very important because then the people had no problem accessing the library, so she made libraries more accessible. And now of course the same tradition has been carried on, libraries have been spotted around in community centres and also in malls as well.

[00:17:51]

**Charlene:** I understand, Mr. Rama, that in the opening of the branch libraries, that the book, the database was also more culturally relevant to the communities at that point as well. Could you share a little bit about the selection process?

[00:18:05]

**Ramachandran:** The book selection process is a very tedious process and that's what Ms. Anuar emphasised, that every book does not, must be selected, and therefore the bookshop is different from library, bookshop only says the bestsellers, you know, and the bookshop, as different from library, is that it promotes the books, but it promotes the bestsellers only. But the book... the librarian selects the books, he curates the books and therefore he becomes a well-known person in the community as well because he takes care of children's needs. And therefore it becomes very important for children. And not only that, the selection of books at that time was very important because it was locally suited, must be suited. and local books were not available at the time, especially for children, but then the Asian communities in America and other diaspora, they wrote books for children at that time, for American audiences, but still relevant to Singapore audiences as well. So that... that was a very important part of Singapore. And our contribution was a very sort of manual-like, which was a selection policy, which she created.

[00:19:30]

Theme Music

[00:19:40]

**Charlene:** So having a more culturally relevant book database allowed the library to lose its label as a haven for the upper-class and English-educated, becoming a people's library. Accessibility is of crucial importance in developing an information literate society. And increased accessibility was a significant development in the library system that took place during Hedwig's time at the National Library. During that time, the library went from a single building in Stamford Road, to having nine branches around the island, leading to membership ballooning from about 40,000 to 330,000. Another initiative was the mobile library systems, the branch libraries phased out the mobile library system, which was started in 1960. They had the aim of connecting the library to doors in rural districts and eased the problem of overcrowding at the National Library building. It used old army vehicles loaded with books. The first one was loaded with children's books to visit the Naval Base school in Nee Soon. It was a great success, by the end of September 1960, the van had visited 37 primary schools and attracted some 2,300 children to join as library members, the warm reception resulted in more than ten service points located at community centres and diverse housing estates, such as Pasir Panjang, Bukit Panjang, Chong Pang, and Changi. The mobile library vehicles visited various primary schools and community centers once every fortnight. Each vehicle carried over 2000 books in all four official languages, English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, and would operate from 5:00 PM to 7:00 PM as this was generally a convenient time for both working adults and children to use these facilities. The mobile libraries continued to reach out to more communities over the next couple of decades until it was phased out in 1990. So Michelle, could you share a little bit about how Mrs. Anuar helped to cultivate a culture, a nation of readers?

[00:21:33]

**Michelle:** Yes, Charlene, as you mentioned, there was the start of the mobile library service in 1960, and it had brought the library to 35 schools and rural districts and community centres. And I think the wonderful thing that she did was that she promoted the service by screening short documentaries in the cinema. So you can imagine the kind of, uh, wide reach it had because everybody goes to the cinema for entertainment. So reading became not a chore, but actually entertainment. And then in 1966, she started the young people's service for library members, aged 15 to 19. And this was a sort of like club, and a sort of a hang out place of teenage reading clubs, drama groups, and young writer's circle. So she tried to promote the arts, literary arts, amongst young people, and many of these young people then grew up to be authors, educators who really benefited from these services. And then by the 1970s, she started this weekly radio magazine program for Radio Singapore called "Our Library", extracts from books, book reviews, news, and also highlights of events at the library. So really it was sort of like a massive promotion of our library services and really brought the kind of programs that we had, the kind of collection that we had to the people of Singapore. And by the 1980s, of course, these have progressed to National Reading Fortnightly or Monthly campaigns from 1982 to 1985 at more than 30 venues at public libraries, community centers and shopping malls. So at that time it was quite a, I would say, progressive idea to bring reading to shopping malls. Yeah. And I personally, I recall a lot of events, very fun events, like for example, um, local authors, such as Adrian Tan, he would come to branch libraries to speak about his books, autograph, and all of us would bring our books to be autographed by him. There were many, many other writers as well. And of course there was skits and performances at shopping malls. And I thought that it was so cool, it still is.

[00:23:46]

**Ramachandran:** The other point that she mentioned was the media. Mrs. Anuar was always sought after by the media, unlike most librarians now, for example, and she was a media person and she cultivated the media people and everything she did was... became public news. So that... that... that was very important as well. I think she not only cultivated media persons, but politicians and the community people as well. So she looked up to the library as a total service to the community.

[00:24:18]

**Charlene:** Mr. Rama, could you share maybe one of your personal recollections, like your favorite memory of Mrs. Anuar in, doing a media related thing?

[00:24:25]

**Ramachandran:** Yes. One point was that during the, during those times, there was also bomb threats in the library as well, and there was a anonymous caller who called Mrs. Anuar saying there's a bomb, but actually it was not a bomb, but Mrs Anuar took it seriously and vacated the library. And every staff and every community member in the library was very difficult to get out of the library, and she made it a point to get out. And she was the last person to get out of the library, in that sense. This was, at that time, was publicly known and reported, reported by the media. And it was the fact that she was the last person to come, was instrumental in saying that she cared for staff and people in that sense, that was very important.

[00:25:24]

**Charlene:** So she wouldn't leave until everyone has left?

[00:25:25]

**Ramachandran:** Everybody has left, yes.

[00:25:28]

Theme Music

## EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY: THE COMPUTERISATION OF LIBRARY SERVICES

[00:25:37]

**Charlene:** So I think it's a good time for us to actually talk a little bit, as we're talking about accessibility as well, about the kind of technology that Mrs. Anuar introduced to the library as well to make it more user friendly, and how she brought the library to be more forward, more future-forward as well. Mr. Rama, I understand that I think in Singapore Writers' Festival last year, you mentioned that she actually helped to pioneer the computerisation of the library services in 1985 after attending, uh, introductory course on computerization at NUS. Can you share a little bit about what kind of technology was involved?

[00:26:09]

**Ramachandran:** Yes, even before that she had been instrumental in bringing the audio-visual aids, because for her, the library was not a book library, it was an information place, a place for information, for, any library was a container for information in those days. So therefore it was obviously largely books, but as the library progressed, audio-visual came in, microchips came in and microphones came in and she adapted them. And even in the 1980s, even before the computer scheme, she was already a librarian in that sense, because she was information-oriented. And when, when she, that's why she formed the SILAS committee, SILAS is Singapore Integrated Union Catalogue. In those days, the catalogues of library contained all information that is in the library, but catalogues from all the libraries of Singapore, how to bring them together? And she convinced us that... that was even before 1985. And then in 1985 she was appointed to, to become, become a core... what do you call it? She attended a course during the computerisation time. She, at once, ordered for all the staffs a computer in the library. I still remember at the time just typing, learning computer work at that time in 1985, 86. So in that sense, she already bring... brought computers in the library as well for staff in the beginning.

[00:27:46]

**Michelle:** Maybe I can add something related to the proliferation of computerisation in libraries as a, as someone who has benefited from that. I recall as a child, I wanted to find books, but it was, we go by, of course, now I know that we go by, DDC numbers, right? But you know, as the end user, you don't really know what's the Dewey Decimal system. So you just go around the shelves, looking for books. Then one day I was told by a branch librarian, you can use this computer, just type in the title that you want to find out. And I recall very clearly it was, there was an image of an octopus and it was, I think it was called, at that time Online Public Access, OPAC, it's still, there is still a system, you know, now, and I was very, very impressed. Like, wow, I can just, by typing in the title, I can find a book. This was very early on. Of course now it's so much more progressive in the sense that you can search for almost anything on our eResources page, from newspaper archives to journal articles. But at that time it was, as an end-user, I felt that it was so useful. Yeah.

[00:29:00]

**Ramachandran:** I think one other point to emphasise is that the OPAC, when Michelle mentioned that, so OPAC also you can find what you have, not have in the libraries, in National Library, but in other libraries as well. So SILAS was the medium to find it out. So you could, you can book a library, book a, book in, in the university library if you want, because it's not... in the... available in the National Library, so in that sense.

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**Charlene:** Which are still systems that exist today, right?

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**Ramachandran:** Of course.

[00:29:34]

**Charlene:** And like I mean, and it's really just like the fact that when we use OneSearch right now, I can actually, you know, find a book in Bukit Batok, you know, when I have to travel there, or reserve it and bring it to my library. But it's so interesting to hear that it started up so much earlier

as well. Mr. Rama, you mentioned a little bit about how she bought computers for everybody. Was there any resistance in terms of this, adapting to a new technology?

[00:29:54]

**Ramachandran:** I think there wasn't because I remember Mrs. P. was in charge of children's services, very old lady at that time. Even old ladies began typing! To me, it was, as a young man at the time, you know, was, was something new to me, you know, because yeah, you go on saying that old people cannot learn, but yes, she was learning at that time. Then there was also no resistance, of course.

[00:30:25]

**Michelle:** Sorry this was a legacy that continued that Mrs. Anuar has left for all of us at the library. The fact that we embraced technology at the library, this has been brought to the fore in the current condition where we have a pandemic. We were unable to reach a lot of our patrons when we have programs, usually they come to the library. So we were wondering, what do we do during shutdowns, social distancing measures? So then we very quickly embraced how to use zoom. We taught ourselves and we were also given lessons by our very capable colleagues and we started broadcasting our programs such as "A Librarian's World" from our living rooms and also our study rooms at home. And at first, there was a little bit of, I would say, apprehension because we were not too sure how it would be received but, you know, it was so popular. It is still very popular. And the comments that are given by our patrons are real-time, so we are able to reach out to them and real-time, and then immediately answered them through the chat system.

## NURTURING A CULTURE OF CARE AND MENTORSHIP IN THE LIBRARY

[00:31:36]

**Charlene:** Mr. Rama, just now you mentioned it, there wasn't much resistance from the staff in adopting the technology. Do you think that's partly due to the kind of leader that Mrs. Anuar was?

[00:31:43]

**Ramachandran:** Yes, I think so. I think it trickled down to, you know, everybody else. And then, and then she was very personal in our attitude towards people, and she had an open-door policy, as you know. And once, I remember she coming to shelves, and she always comes to shelves to pick up books, and pick up those books that are old and tattered, and then she will discard them. And then she came to my desk, I think, and then she told me, "How are you faring?" And then I tell her, "Everything is okay, Ms. Anuar, except that my wife has delivered a baby and my wife and my baby are sick." "What are you doing here?" And then I packed my bags and I went to the hospital straight away. So that was the extent of her personal involvement in staff matters.

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**Michelle:** There's also another legacy that's continued because when I first joined the library, I was being mentored by our senior librarians. And then we have a buddy system whereby new librarians are able to learn the ropes. And it's very much an apprenticeship system apart from our formal qualifications in information studies or library studies, for example. And to this day, our supervisors, our directors will always have an open-door policy. They will always tell us, you know, if there's anything you want to share with me, my office doors are open to you. You just send me an email, let's book a time and we can chat. I'm so grateful for that.

## ESTABLISHING THE LIBRARIAN AS AN IMPORTANT PROFESSION IN THE LITERARY ARTS WORLD

[00:33:11]

**Ramachandran:** I think at this point, I'm led to mention the fact that for, for Mrs. Anuar, librarian was core, core to the, you mentioned about the eco, ecosystem, the core in the ecosystem,



because at that time library was everything. I mean, there was no museum, there was museum but no emphasis on museum, but library was everything. And library became the core and booksellers and publishers and everybody was not taken as core, but librarians were core and they developed the system.

[00:33:51]

**Charlene:** And they kind of became like a lifestyle choice as well, because it was something that people at the time could engage with on a regular basis as well.

[00:33:57]

**Ramachandran:** Mrs. Anuar considered the librarians core to the book world. That's very important because in the book world, at that time, the booksellers, publishers, all were salesmen, their... their offices were overseas. And so then in that sense, very important because she made the librarian in today too, the librarians are the most educated and most well organised people in the library service, not the publishers, though they claim otherwise, but the publishers were developed by the National Library and the Book Council. That's why the whole writer's world in the world of books and information was developed in the beginning by the Book Council and the National Library. That's very important, you see, the, the, the core message to come because the people don't accept this, but it is the library world that created other worlds.

[00:35:00]

**Charlene:** But that's so interesting as well because I think we see the library as non-profit, right?

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**Ramachandran:** Exactly.

[00:25:06]

**Charlene:** And we see it as a place where we go to, but the fact that in Singapore, at least, it helped to start this entire ecosystem.

[00:35:11]

**Ramachandran:** Exactly, in other countries, it's the publishers who drew the library, the book sellers drew the library, but here it's the other way around it.

[00:35:19]

**Michelle:** It's the library that drives a lot of programs, initiatives...

[00:25:23]

**Ramachandran:** Yeah, Yeah, exactly!

[00:35:25]

**Michelle:** Like I said, people will come to the reference counter and ask me, "What does it take to be a receptionist here?" So many people, they did not have an idea of what librarians did, but with encouragement and the legacy of Mrs. Hedwig Anuar, we actually are continuously seeking further education, training, in technological aspects as well as in content aspects. Mr. Rama is also one of those who we always work with, as well as other partners like yourselves, from Sing Lit Station. We are very, very lucky to have such strong partnerships with various sectors in the arts. So that contributes to our ecosystem as well.

## GROWING THE ASIAN CHILDREN'S COLLECTION AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

[00:36:08]

**Ramachandran:** The other thing I would mention is also legacies, the Asian books for childrens. She collected it, and now it's a showpiece in the National Library. Of course now, the National Library is transported to the Woodlands libraries.

[00:36:27]

**Michelle:** No, no... come back.

[00:26:28]

**Ramachandran:** Come, come, come back. That's very good. Because that is the National Collection you see.

[00:36:32]

**Michelle:** That's right, National Library librarians, for example, are encouraged to research and write, and we have written about the Asian Children's Collection. And this is a very laudable effort by Mrs. Hedwig Anuar as well as the earlier librarians who actually collected these thousands of books to promote Asian children's books. Because at that time, the library was a legacy from our colonial times, it had mostly books that were catered to the English speaking world. So she wanted very much to build up a collection that was relevant to our part of the world. That's how Asian Children's Collection came about. And not only that, it made it to the very well-known lists of books worldwide. It has international acclaim actually, and to this day, we are continuing to, I would say, research, and we invite researchers also to, to look into our books as well as to share it, as well as our parents to share it with their children, you know, if they want to come and, uh, maybe get to know more about it, but look out for our articles in Asia, and also our talks about the Asian Children's Collection in A Librarian's World and various other platforms. We really hope that, now that it has come back to our, the National Library at level nine, we hope that more people can access this very rich collection, which also includes books in other languages, Chinese, Japanese, even Bahasa Indonesia, as well as many other languages, various formats as well.

[00:38:13]

**Ramachandran:** So you, if you want to do a search in those days, you have to go to England or to universities. If you want to research on Southeast Asia, you can come to the National Library. That's the point of our reference services, now it's become a big, it's more a reference service than a national library service. In most countries, the public library services are separate from national library service, but in this country, because we are compact, both the national library functions and the library functions, the public library functions, are into one body.

[00:38:44]

**Michelle:** We work as a team with our public library colleagues, and it's a very good synergy that we have.

## HEDWIG ANUAR AS PAVING THE WAY FOR FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN THE LITERARY ARTS

[00:38:49]

**Charlene:** So I think in the progress of this podcast, we've been talking a lot about Mrs. Anuar's work and how she tried to make it very accessible, tried to make reading very accessible to the masses. And, you know, we can all tell that her work was very socially-conscious as well. But I think it's also worth noting that she was also the first woman director of the library as well. Mr. Rama, could you maybe share a little bit about how librarianship was viewed as a profession back in, in that period of time?

[00:39:17]

**Ramachandran:** Yes. In that period of time, library was not regarded as professional at all. And in that sense, it's instrumental for libraries to evolve as a profession during the time of Ms. Anuar. Mrs. Anuar was the first director, and she was a qualified director and she had a Fellowship of the Library Association of Britain. Fellowship is a very top grade, top most person in the library field will

get a fellowship. So in that sense, she organised the library and then found out that the library is a different place and it is a place, and anybody can run a bookshop, but not the library, because the library is a special, curated place and therefore, she made librarians into professionals and she only, from her, she only chose graduates and professionals. So that was the first thing she did, was to, from now on, library became the graduate profession. And then she... she felt that every librarian must be trained and she, at the beginning, she trained librarians for all seasons, she was very contact, contact conscious. And she got scholarships from everywhere possible, from global plan, from, from, from her contacts, from everybody. And that, that's why today, librarians, the former librarians were very well trained and they were all trained overseas. And later on, when localised training became available, she again initiated the library program, training program in the library, and she hosted the Library Association program in the library. And that became a NUS degree course later on, and NTU, I think later on became NTU degree course later on. But the point is, she made the professionals at top. At the same time, she also felt that, like nurses, she also felt that there should be a second level profession. And therefore she engaged library technicians, library technicians were second grade and the lab attendants for the third grade. And therefore she also conducted training for library technicians and, and therefore both the library profession into a whole category of services.

[00:42:02]

**Charlene:** I think all that was, everything that you just said was so important to understand. I think, especially because in those days, librarianship was actually started out mostly as a woman's job. Most women became librarians because they didn't want to become teachers. And one example was Mrs. Anuar herself who came from a family of teachers and then decided, nope, I'm not doing teaching, let's see what libraries do for me instead. And also because, many women took up these roles because there were prospects of going overseas, and everything that you just mentioned helped to kind of make it, to help to kind of professionalise it as a career that now we also have men who have come in with the expansion of the NLB, and incorporation of the technologies that she introduced resulting in more career prospects and the possibility of development as well. Could you maybe share a little bit, maybe both of you, what do you think Mrs. Anuar is on women and women in the arts?

[00:42:51]

**Michelle:** Yes, well, actually Mrs. Anuar was kind of a very elegant figure and defined the art of an understatement when she said that she embarked on a career in librarianship because she could not find another job. That's what she said. Of course she was half joking, but like you said, at that time, many ladies, they had limited job opportunities in her time. Today, maybe I could share with you what she, she said in a speech. This is also from some of the documents that she has donated to the National Library via the Hedwig Anuar donor collection. She was stirred to action and this is what she said, "With economic independence, you may choose to marry, or not to, to have a career, or to combine a career with marriage, or to have children, or not. It is up to the individual woman to make any of these choices, or combination of choices as wisely as possible in the light of her circumstances, abilities, personality, views, and preferences. Any one of these choices is a valid choice and will contribute equally not only to your wellbeing, but also to that of Singapore as a whole." So she was a visionary. Actually, we are the ones who really benefited from this vision because unlike, maybe our great-grandmothers, grandmothers, who are not able to speak for themselves, Mrs. Anuar actually provided a voice through her work in so many fields, not just through the libraries, but also in the field of literary arts, she was a writer, she promoted reading, she set up various, or rather she drove various initiatives, like symposiums, which eventually also led to the formation of Singapore Writer's Week, to what we know today, Singapore Writers' Festival. These are choices, of course, because reading opens up a world, reading opens up a child's mind. And when you open up a child's mind, that's when progress can really begin. One of the things that Mr. Rama said when he visited the library was "Look, Michelle, Singapore is such a good country. Here, the library is so quiet and very conducive environment for reading." So you can see how our youths have benefited from our library system. There are so many libraries now, you can even get books when you're at home. That's what librarianship, that's what her. Mrs. Anuar's work in advocating reading, as well as literary arts, has done for us, I feel.

[00:45:29]  
Theme Music

## THE FOUNDING YEARS OF THE NATIONAL BOOK DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL AND THE START OF THE SINGAPORE LITERATURE PRIZE

[00:45:37]

**Charlene:** So earlier, Mr. Rama mentioned that one of the key aspects of trying to make a culturally relevant book database was the need for local writers to produce books. So another institution in which Hedwig Anuar played a pivotal role was the organisation we now know as the Singapore Book Council, which she co-founded. So Hedwig Anuar was actually appointed the National Book Development Council director in 1981, and she held on to this role until her retirement as a director of the National Library and Chairperson of NBDCS in 1988. But she did continue to serve as an executive committee member until 1998, so about 10 years. It was launched in 1969 as the National Book Development Council of Singapore and established promotional, literacy, reading, training and publishing programmes to strengthen the capabilities of authors and foster a culture of reading and writing. Some of these programs include awards such as the NBDCS book award, which ran from 1972 to 1999, the still ongoing Singapore Literature Prize, which was launched in 1991, as well as the Hedwig Anuar Children's Book Award. So maybe at this point, I'll elaborate a little bit more about the Singapore Literature Prize. So it was first launched in 1991 with the initial aim to promote Singapore literary works in English. Its scope has since expanded to include works in Malay, Chinese, and Tamil, as well as nonfiction works. When it first started, two of its goals was to open doors for emerging writers, as well as to bolster the reputation of local publishers. Over the years, there's been some debates on its usefulness. For example, in 1992, Mr. Gopal Baratham, the author of *A Candle or the Sun*, rejected the award for Highly Commended Prize due to the basis of feeling that the council's criteria were different from his own. In vernacular circles, the prize is seen as less important than the Nanyang Chinese Literature Award for Chinese works, the Anugerah Persuratan for Malay books - although Mr Syed Ali Semait, of Malay publisher Pustaka Nasional says that the Singapore Literature Prize is more recognised abroad. There have been some arguments from writers and publishers who wonder about the impact on sales of the awards, since the prize already preaches to a converted audience. The SLP has also not propelled its winners onto The Straits Times bestseller list, which compiles the best-selling titles from major bookstores in Singapore. With these slight apprehensions, it has resulted in increasingly less entries over the years, despite there being more literary works released over the years. I think it's worth noting in 1993, that there were no winners, only consolation prizes as the council felt like the standard of entries were too low. There were only two merit and three commendation prizes, which were given out to participants from the two categories, poetry and drama. Mr. Rama, could you share a little bit about the Singapore Literature Prize?

[00:48:32]

**Ramachandran:** Okay, the Singapore Literature Prize came out of Mrs Anuar's concern for, for encouraging the local writers to write more books. Now, this was a precursor to NBDCS book prize, which was started in 1972. In 1972, there was no prize in itself, no monetary value in the prizes, so she slowly increased the prizes. Now, what she did was in the 1972, there were no books published, you know, and very few published and, and therefore there were no books and no award given except in 1976 onwards. Now the book awards, she found it as a most important part of the Book Council, because in the Book Council, you could ask for donations, versus the National Library as a national institute, you couldn't. So it should drove the Book Council into funding policies; the National Library was not funded very well at that point. So therefore, the book awards became very important. In 1991, the books were awarded to those publishers who didn't publish manuscripts. There was, because manuscripts were most important and therefore it developed manuscripts. And in 1999 onwards, then we found out that the good books were not taken up with publishers. Publishers are very business minded and they want books to sell, so the best written

books are... normally do not sell. So therefore in 2000 onward, we began to award books, Singapore Literature Prizes to books that were already published, not unpublished versions of books.

[00:50:34]

**Charlene:** And maybe at this point, Mr. Rama, could you share with us a little bit about how you began to be involved with NBDCS?

[00:50:39]

**Ramachandran:** Yes. Now I was a... In the... in the beginning, the National Library and the Book Council was transparent. The chairman of the Book Council and the National Library, the directors of National Library were the same. For example, Mrs. Anuar became the secretary general of the Book Council in the beginning, but that's how she became chairman at the Book Council. And therefore, when she asked the librarian to do some work for Book Council, you had to do, you know, there was no, so in that sense, she will invoked the librarians to do much work and also become introduced to publishers, introduced the booksellers and the writers as well because the Book Council was the only means towards that. So in that sense, the publishers and the Book Council was a very important body.

[00:51:41]

**Charlene:** And I understand that in between 1998 to 2004, you're the chairperson of NBDCS.

[00:51:46]

**Ramachandran:** Yes.

[00:51:47]

**Charlene:** Could you share a little bit about your time as a chairperson there?

[00:51:50]

**Ramachandran:** Now in 1999, Mrs. Anuar was normal in the limelight, so there was somebody, there was need for somebody to take over. And that is why I came in at the National Library to become the Book Council. But that time the National Library already changed, so the Book Council had to be completely separate from the National Library, and the Book Council, as a chairman, I had to develop new ideas to promote books and to promote reading and writing. And that's where the Singapore Literature Prize came in, and that's where the Asian children's writers came in, and writers for children's books came in. And emphasis was Asian books because we felt that library need Asian books. At the time, you know we used to go throughout the world to select books and each time our infrastructure was good, but the books were not local. And there, we mentioned Singapore collection of books, Singapore section, and Mrs. Anuar was very, very adamant in also bringing the Singapore collection into Singapore, so she defined the Singapore collection as those published about Singapore, not, need not be a national of Singapore at the time. So in that sense, Singapore collection has become a very much wider, which also included fiction as well as non-fiction.

## INTRODUCTION OF THE TRANSLATION SCHEME

[00:53:29]

**Charlene:** Thank you so much for that. So other initiatives of the NBDCS included the translation scheme, which was launched in 1978, which sponsored the translations of books. Sponsorship amount ranged from, between \$2,000 and \$3,000, and the aim was "to enable publishers of literary and creative works to reach a wider audience." Anuar said, "Such translated works will also help local readers to overcome the barriers of language and be able to read good literary works written by authors in another medium of language." Works translated under the scheme included the 1918 Malay novel "Ta'ada Jalan Keluar" by Suratman Markasan, and a 1993 Chinese novel "A Man Like Me" by Yeng Pway Ngon. The integration of technology in the book



world was also seen in the 1994 Festival of Books & Book Fair which incorporated a comprehensive range of e-formats for literature, decades before the popularity of eBooks. Mr. Rama, I think the Translation Scheme links back to what you were seeing much earlier on about how there weren't enough books in other languages, and it had to be written.

[00:54:31]

**Ramachandran:** Local books, yes. I think the Translation Scheme is very important, and that's why even today, translation is very important, it's emphasised in the National Library. In fact, translated thousands of books into other languages as well. The important thing about translation is that you must pay the translator very well, and translation of fiction is more difficult than translation of non-fiction and therefore, this is not well understood by the Singapore public, and there's no money in translation as well. And that's why the Book Council today, and even before, emphasised translation and, and today there's a special course for translations, translators as well. So in that sense, Mrs. Anuar was legacy, it's very important, Translation Scheme, because that... that invited readers to read about other communities, which they will never meet, otherwise.

[00:55:31]

**Charlene:** So as an arts manager myself, I'm interested in how she tried to promote the Translation Scheme. How did she try and get, you know, people to be interested to translate the work?

[00:55:40]

**Ramachandran:** Yes, now, first and foremost, translators are, you must know the translators. Now first you must pay them, and so she got the funding, you know, through the Book Council to pay them. And that was very important. And the translators are, sometimes mentioned in the translated books as well. So therefore, translators as a, as a community, as an important member of the community becomes very important as that at the same time. Not only writers, but translators are important as well.

[00:56:17]

Theme Music

## GROWING A READING NATION THROUGH PROGRAMMES LIKE NATIONAL READING BOOK AND THE FESTIVAL OF BOOKS AND BOOK FAIR

[00:56:25]

**Charlene:** I think the other question that I would like to ask is also about the programmes that the Book Council developed and organised to grow reading and writing. I'm thinking of two in particular, the Festival of Books & Book Fair as well as the National Reading Month.

[00:56:41]

**Ramachandran:** Yes.

[00:56:42]

**Charlene:** So just some context for those listening in, the Festival of Books & Book Fair was held annually from 1969 to 1997. It was a nine day festival. In 1989, it had a record \$5.15 million of books sold. In 1990, the theme became Reading Odyssey, which was actually the same theme as the National Reading Month, and this particular version of the fair had 132 participants representing 2000 national, regional and international publishers with a total of 502 stands featuring over 160,000 titles. That's a lot. And these titles range from encyclopaedias, children's books and textbooks, to adult fiction. There were 20 independent foreign participants, including those from Indonesia and Malaysia. And it was so popular that they had to turn away requests for 100 more stands due to lack of space. In 1992, the theme was Reading for Everyone, and that particular fair gave special attention to children with reading disabilities. What was brought to attention was the lack of suitable books for them, which needs to be well-illustrated, simple enough

to read, with large print. There was also a shortage of audio books and books in braille. A first for the fair was 35 stores featuring electronic publishing equipment, computers and software for publishing, books on tape and encyclopaedias on laser discs. In 1994, what was interesting about this particular fair was that it sought to widen the scope of the book fair by introducing electronic publishing and modern communication technology. It started thinking a bit more about developing the commercial aspect of the fair, and there was a plan to include a rights fair within the next five years, which would provide occasions for those in the book trade to make deals with overseas counterparts for the rights to translate, publish, and distribute the books in other countries. There were more than 1.4 million visitors at a record 552 stands. This particular edition of the festival was a major regional event and it was reported as the only one to have been held without a break for the last 25 years. In 1995, the theme was Read to Understand. In this particular edition, they actually set up an organising team recognizing that the annual Singapore Festival of Books had become a major event that needed to be steered by a professional team and full-time staff, they included a wide range of activities for children and an even wider usage of technology.

[00:59:16]

**Ramachandran:** Yes, the Festival of Books & Book Fair came to end in 1999, I think. And it was the first book festival that was organised by the Book Council, and it became a very big success. And by 2008, it lost steam. And by 2000, there were other festival, bookshops have become, the Popular Bookshop, the other festivals, and the, the, the others also became part of the market. Therefore the book festival, it was organised by both the publishers and the writing community, as well by... by organised by the Book Council, you know, in that sense, the Book Council also played a very important part in promoting books because anybody will remember the book... the book festival, because it was programme-related as well. And also, at any one time, you could get the best books in Singapore and the world, for example. And, and that's the time, the book festival was very important at the time. And there is programme-related because the schools were also sending, waiting for, you know, the book festival to select books as well. So it became a very important part of the whole community. The other short-lived one was National Reading Month, which again, needed a lot of funding, and it's a bit, it died because there was no funding. The idea was when, when it became funded, it would become a very big hit because that was the only time when the principals and the schools became involved in the National Reading Month as well. And it became a huge success story later on, later on the NLB adopted that program as well.

[01:01:14]

**Charlene:** So for context, the National Reading Month started in 1982 and was held until 1994, and it was held annually. Its mission was to train Singaporeans in literacy, reading publishing, library development, and the literary arts to build a reading society in a time where Singaporeans were behind other countries in their reading habits. Hedwig Anuar actually said "Our writers are produced from our readers". So the Reading Month was actually a result of a National Readership Survey that was done, and it included workshops, seminars, exhibitions, and conferences. In 1989, the theme was "Towards a Nation of Readers", very clearly what the aim of the event was. The target was all age groups, and for the first time, the event included the highly popular Singapore International Festival of Books & Book Fair, which was attended in the previous year by 1 million people. It also included a Books Come Alive concert, a programme on poetry appreciation featuring Chinese and English poetry reading sessions and workshops for teenagers, three drama workshops for teenagers, reading workshops, forums and talks organised for parents and teachers. Two of the highlights of the 1989 event was a seminar on children's literature in Singapore, as well as an international story-telling festival featuring storytellers from the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan and the United States. In 1990, the theme was Reading Odyssey. This is the same theme as the Festival of Books & Books Fair. The target audience for this particular edition was preschoolers to teens, parents, and teachers, and also a strong emphasis on storytelling. Hedwig Anuar mentioned of this particular edition that "The slogan conveys to the public that reading is like an exciting voyage to the unknown future.", "This is what reading can be - a reader can undertake this journey into the past or future, into space and the unknown, into a world of imagination or into a jungle of

facts through wide reading." What was special about the 1991 edition was that there were four workshops on how to choose books for children who were 14 years old and below. This was held at the Bukit Merah branch library, further emphasising the need for accessibility.

[01:03:29]

**Michelle:** Maybe I can just add on about what I found out from the Hedwig Anuar donor collection at the National Library. So we were given several photo albums of programs, as well as initiatives that Mrs. Anuar initiated and which her staff had also helped to promote. And one of these was of course, like what Mr. Rama said, was the National Reading Month. And I think it was in the late 1980s, and one of our former directors, Mrs. Koh Lai Lin, she was actually in charge of one of these programs, and what she, what she mentioned was that these were held at, amongst the venues that these were held, was at shopping malls. And she went around making, Mrs. Anuar went around making sure that everything was in order and only left at the very end of the day. So that showed you how much drive she had to make these a success. And not only that, the donor collection also featured a lot of personal documents and a lot of papers written about literacy initiatives, which were typescripts, which along the right-hand side column or left-hand side column, there were actual writings by Mrs. Anuar. She would edit and re-edit, and then put thoughts into it. So it was from these documents that I found out that she had worked tirelessly to promote reading, yep, from the firsthand, that's what I saw.

[01:05:00]

**Charlene:** And something that she very famously said was also that "Our writers are produced from our readers", which was... also probably explained her drive as well.

[01:05:09]

**Ramachandran:** Yes, one other thing that Michelle mentioned is that she also founded the Singapore Book World, which is a publication, which was no more in existence, but 50 years it existed. Now the Singapore Book World is very important because it also was a critique. So every librarian and every book... book world person could write a criticism of the book that's published, and that was in all four languages, and that was printed in the Book World. And also there were articles about the Singapore book world, about the Singapore book world in the world itself. So therefore it was a very important document and very important, now, becomes a very important part of the Singapore world of books.

[01:05:59]

Theme Music

## THE EARLY YEARS OF THE SINGAPORE WRITERS' FESTIVAL

[01:06:07]

**Charlene:** So Michelle, earlier you mentioned the Singapore Writers' Week, and this was actually something that Serene mentioned in Episode One, as well as part of the episode about the Singapore Arts Festival. So in 1986, there was the introduction of the Writer's Week, which remained as part of the Singapore Arts Festival until 1990 and was subsequently spin-off to become the Singapore Writers' Festival in 1991. Could you maybe elaborate a little bit about that?

[01:06:32]

**Michelle:** Yes, I first chanced upon, in photographs, within the Hedwig Anuar donor collection, of symposiums, literary symposium in the early 1980s. And she was seated with professor Edwin Thumboo, as well as many of our pioneer writers. And I was wondering what these symposiums were. Well, later on I found out that these events... they were part of the efforts to promote Singapore locally written books, as well as platforms to critique, as platforms to encourage writing, our own writing. Singapore Writers' Week, later, it progressed, it grew, and we have what we now know as Singapore Writers' Festival. It was, in the 1980s, Singapore Writers' Week was a modest enterprise compared to what it is now. So Mrs. Anuar, as well as of course, the staff of our library,

played a...I feel very, very critical role in the promotion of these books, to spread awareness, to create a young generation that grew up reading and being proud of our own voice. Now, that's very important as we see how, previously, a lot of, maybe people didn't really have an awareness of what Singapore literature is, but you now we have Sing Lit Station, we have Poetry Festival Singapore, we have so many Singapore-based writers, writing not only for Singapore, but for the world. I think that's one of the legacies that Mrs. Anuar, as well as our pioneer writers, they played such a great role in pushing forward our literary voice.

[01:08:16]

**Ramachandran:** I think Michelle mentioned Edwin Thumboo, just want to mention the fact that Edwin Thumboo has told me once before that if Hedwig Anuar was not a librarian, thank god she was a librarian, she will have taken my post at the English literature level as a professor of English literature. Also, the other note is about the Singapore Writers' Festival. Singapore has been known as a commercial city, the ugly Singaporean term used later. But she converted the ugly Singaporean into a holistic figure, as a nice Singaporean, as a good Singaporean. And therefore Singapore became a regional hub, an international hub for writers as well. And the Writers' Festival continues the tradition. And in that sense, it's Singapore contributing to the writer's world besides the economy world as well.

[01:09:16]

**Ramachandran:** We are proud of our own voice now, our literary voice, and that's something that has been achieved within a few decades. And I think that's really fantastic. There's a legacy of Mrs. Anuar, the library, as well as our pioneer writers.

[01:09:29]

**Charlene:** So I think over the time of this podcast, we've really gone through many different areas of what Hedwig Anuar has done, for the literary arts in Singapore, especially in developing a culture of reading and writing, along with, you know, mentions of quite a few organisations that she helped to co-found and develop along the way, some of which are still initiatives we still have right now in our day and age as well. So with that, I'd like to thank Mr. R. Ramachandran, as well as Ms. Michelle Heng for joining us for our session today.

[01:10:00]

**Michelle:** Thank you very much, Charlene!

[01:10:00]

**Ramachandran:** Thank you very much, a very good session.

[01:10:03]

**Serene:** You've just come to the end of another episode of Backlogues, an arts management podcast series. Thank you for listening!

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