

EPISODE 7 TRANSCRIPT

INTRODUCTION TO BACKLOGUES

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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 its growth.

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

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Charlene Shepherdson: I'm Charlene Shepherdson, and we are back for another literary arts episode of Backlogues. While the arts manager and the literary arts was not a clearly defined professional role during the 1980s, which is a period of focus for this pilot series of Backlogues, this episode, like the last one, provides critical contextual background on the literary art ecosystem. In particular, we are spotlighting the people behind the ancillary systems required to sustain the literary arts and the book ecosystem in Singapore. In our last episode, we charted the development of Singapore's reading culture, looking specifically at initiatives and programs spearheaded by the National Library, as well as the National Book Development Council of Singapore under the direction of Hedwig Anuar. We learned how reading was made more accessible through the libraries' many programs and initiatives, as well as the various forms of support given to develop and nurture local writers and literary talent. For this episode, we are turning our attention to local book publishing houses that were started during the 1980s. When we think of the literary landscape, we tend to think of the romantic idea of writers just sitting at a desk for hours before producing a perfectly edited final draft and catapulting into fame and book-signing events. The reality is that it is often the unique vision, dedication and hard work of publishers that catalyses the process of writers getting printed and finding readers. So what is the impact of publishing houses on the development of the literary landscape? Publishers are the bridges that connect the supply and value chains of the literary arts. It is a supply chain as it provides a series of organizational links by means of which each book is virtually produced and transmitted via distributors and retailers to an end user who purchases it. Each link in the supply chain add some value. The ways in which publishing houses add value to this process is through: content acquisition and list building, financial investment and risk-taking, content development, quality control, management and coordination, sales, marketing, and promotions. And this episode, we are delighted to speak to the founders of two important publishing houses, with passion for promoting local and regional works. Their ambitious and risk-taking spirit encourages writers to continue producing meaningful work. By doing so, they propelled the development of the literary art scene. So I'm really excited to welcome Mr. Goh Eck Kheng from Landmark Books. Hello, nice to have you here with us today!

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Goh Eck Kheng: Hello, hello!

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Charlene: We also have with us Ms. Lim Li Kok from Asiapac Books. Hi, Ms. Lim!

[00:03:03]

Lim Li Kok: Hello everybody!

INTRODUCTION TO THE LOCAL PUBLISHING DURING THE 1980S

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Charlene: So, I guess before we dive into your individual publishing houses, we should probably give everyone who's listening to us an idea of what the literary art scene was like in the 1980s. So I know that in the 1980s, there were other publishers as well, besides Landmark Books as well as Asiapac, so there was Times Publishing, who was one of the oldest and largest publishers, and they have been around since the 1960s. There was also Flame Of The Forest, which was set up in 1989, and they were known for publishing some pretty sensational titles and series such as the Russell Lee's *True Singapore Ghost Stories* series, which, I think is the main core of who we are as you know, as we were growing up. So there was also Imperial Publishing, which put out works such as the 1982 short story collection, *Power House*, by K. Rajamanikam, and Octopus Publishing, which in 1982 published *What If There Had Been No Lee Kuan Yew?* by Anthony Oei. So, maybe to give everyone a bit of context, what was it like for you in the 1980s? Where were you in your life in terms of deciding that, oh, I was going to start a publishing house. So maybe you can tell us a little bit about your background and what got you interested in books?

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Eck Kheng: I... I went to university and did a law degree and I graduated in 1980, 81. And already in the third year of law school, I decided that law wasn't for me. And since my father was a publisher and book distributor, I thought, you know, I have a leg in... into the industry. So I told him that, you know, I'd like to join him in publishing, and he was very discouraging. And, uh, I remember the first thing he did was he brought me to the warehouse full of books. And of course, then I thought, oh, smart alec like me right, I know how to get rid of these books, but now I have a whole warehouse of books too. So that was the 80s'. And the publishing scene there was, I would say, dominated by educational publishers, most of the books that sold well were, uh, for schools. And it wasn't until maybe the mid-80s' that you saw quite a number of general trade publishers, which you mentioned come onto the scene. And that's where the publishing scene became a little bit more diverse and a bit more interesting.

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Li Kok: For me, being a publisher seems my destiny. I grew up in a village school where my father was principal, then later on, in my primary school, my auntie was the principal. So my pastime is always at the library. I... I actually hardly played with other kids, I spent all my childhood reading. But of course, at that time, the books were quite limited in all these small village school. So I just have a liking for books. And later on, after I grew up, I set up a bookstore and I sell book for about 10 years. And while selling the books published by other people, there's a lot of ideas, you know, as I'm a book reader, as a bookseller that is a reader also, so there's a lot of exchange and then we say, why not become a book like this, why not become a book like that. So I have a lot of ideas, then later on I... I met some publishers and I told them my idea, but they... they just not so interested, you see? Then they say, why not you publish? You know, why don't you just publish yourself? So after 10 years of book selling, I decided to be a publisher. Actually, I... I would just say I'm not a marketing person, I'm just do it with my passion and instinct, you know? So I don't even know what we call marketing and all... look at the whole situation. Actually to us, I think Eck Kheng and I are almost the same, like, you know, for the love of books, we... we entered this business and it's like a lifetime career. We don't say, oh, this is a good business, we are going to invest, and later on when it's no good, then we invest in other things. Or now the gold is good, we invest in gold, later on the... what, new energy now is in fashion we do other things. We don't, you know! We are all, like for me, we are just single-minded. Like even now, you know, I'm just even thinking of what should we publish for this era? As a publisher, what should we, as a publisher, publish for the people of our time?

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Charlene: I think we will be interested to hear a little bit about why you set up your own individual companies? Maybe let's start with Eck Kheng first, could you tell us a little bit about like, Landmark Books, and you starting it?

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Eck Kheng: So I joined my father after I graduated from law school in the early 80s'. And that was, the publishing house was Eastern Universities Press. And the distribution company that was connected to it was United Publishers Services (UPS) that distributed books published in England, most of the large British publishing houses were represented by UPS. And when my father decided to retire, in the mid 80s', so maybe 84, 85, the companies, so East UP, Eastern Universities Press and United Publishers Services were sold to The Times Group. So I was sold with them, and I worked at Times Books International for a year. And then in 1986, I started Landmark Books, partly because, at that time, most of the publishing houses were conglomerate publishing houses, Times, MPH, Oxford, Heinemann, they were big companies. And I... I felt that since I learned some things about publishing, it might be interesting for me to start a small company that could give alternatives to authors who maybe weren't comfortable or didn't want to deal with... with big bureaucracies. That's how I started Landmark Books in 1986.

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Charlene: That's actually quite interesting because the year just before 1985, you were also part of the founding group for TheatreWorks, right.

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Eck Kheng: Yes.

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Charlene: Could you tell us a little bit about what it was like founding these two things at the same time?

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Eck Kheng: Oh erm, I think the connector was that through TheatreWorks, I met a lot of people who are writers. I used to tell Keng Sen, and it's still true, eh made all the writers of, of short stories and poets and novels, he made them all playwrights. So Ovidia, Desmond Lim (Sim), and people like that. From writing poetry, and short stories, and potentially novels, they became his playwrights. But anyway, it was a community who I, I met, so one of the writers I met was Michael Chiang, and in 1985, at that time he was working for The Straits Times, we must have chatted, and when Singapore men meet, we talk about National Service, and I said, you know, why don't you write a funny book about National Service? And *Army Daze* was the book, so it was published in 1985 by Times Books International (TBI). Because by that time, I had joined uh, TBI, and although the book was initiated in East UP, uh, it was eventually published by Times.

MORE ON STARTING A PUBLISHING HOUSE IN SINGAPORE

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Charlene: So one of Landmark's first publications was *We Remember: Cameos of Pioneer Life*, which was by Yvonne Quahe. How did you go about approaching writers, or did writers come to you?

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Eck Kheng: Yvonne's husband, er, Graham Colin-Jones, wrote a book about resume writing, and that was published by East UP. And I know Yvonne as a friend, I know her siblings. So, you know, she was interested in writing, and at that time I was beginning to be aware of the work of The National Archives and in particular, the oral history department. And I realised that there was a rich source of material in oral history. And *We Remember*, it is actually a book based on the oral history transcripts. That's a publishers' work, you know? You find people's interest in writing, you think of opportunities, you think of what people might be interested in reading. So it's really joining the dots. So, uh, social history was already a staple in publishing because of the work done by Oxford Universities Press, so it wasn't an untested ground. It's just, you know, being able to see what others are doing, being able to read the market and then see what authors are bringing in or you commission authors to do specific books for you.

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Charlene: I think that's quite interesting because of... while most publishing houses, you know, would choose, for example, say commercial or viable projects, you have been known to, you know, look for like... new or unknown Singaporean writers. So for example, in 1988, um, you publish Adrian Tan's *The Teenage Textbook*, and then later on *The Teenage Workbook* as well.

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Eck Kheng: So that's how the network works. So how did I publish, uh, Adrian? So at that time he was a university student, right, and he was trying to make some money by doing freelance writing, and he was writing for various magazines, including Man Magazine, and at the time, Peter Schoppert, who is now publisher of NUS press, was editor of Man Magazine. Uh, Peter came to me and said, "Hey, you know, I've got this young writer and he's really good. Do you want to meet him?" I said, "Oh, sure, meet him." So we chatted, and then we talked about various things, and persuaded him that he should try writing a novel. And, uh, I just want to add one more story about a book that I did in the 80s'. Sylvia Toh Paik Choo Sylvia's *Eh, Goondul!*

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Charlene: Yeah.

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Eck Kheng: Which was published in 1982. So at that time, Sylvia was working in The Straits Times, and she wrote the "Eh, Goondul!" column for The Sunday Times. So Eh, Goondul! column was just a Singlish word and then she would explain, but it was in a very well-written grammatical English, but in a very funny way. And I remember I was at a family dinner one night and my uncle said, "Hey, you know, you're in publishing now, there's this 'Eh, Goondul!' I read every Sunday, you know, it's very popular. Why don't you put it into a book?" I thought, "Wow, that's a really good idea." And at that time, Jacinta was also working in *The Straits Times*, and she's a friend I knew from TheatreWorks. So I... I called, Ja, and I said, "Hey, you know, uh, can you introduce me to... to Sylvia?" And I remember this very clearly, it was very funny, because we were on the phone and she sort of shouts across the room, "Eh, Paik Joo, come, someone wants to talk to you!" So she gets on the phone and I introduced myself and we decided to meet. And I remember this very clearly, we met at Swensen's in Plaza Singapura, and she said, "I'm wearing a tuxedo", she said, and it was one of these t-shirts with a tuxedo printed on it, and erm, we've become good friends. You know, her... her... her book is just still being reprinted by Marshall Cavendish. And in fact, I just met Sylvia yesterday. It's a book that I'm proud to have published and maybe it's...

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Li Kok: It is the first book about Singlish, right?

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Eck Kheng: It... it was. It was the first book about Singlish, and maybe by a twist of fate or maybe divine punishment, whatever you want to call it, but in the end I became Chair of the Speak Good English Movement, which is quite funny.

[00:15:07]

Li Kok: Yes.

[00:15:09]

Theme Music

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Charlene: Thank you for that. Now that we have better understanding of Landmark Books, I will go over to Li Kok who founded the Asiapac books in 1983. So in the 1980s, there wasn't enough Asian publications in Singapore, much less the comic books that you loves. So could you share with us a little bit about how you started Asiapac books and also about your love for comics?

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Li Kok: That's why I mentioned about, after years of selling books, I find this demand of our own culture. How to say, you know, because in my bookshop, besides the educational textbook, assessment, we also sell general reading, which mainly from Penguin, and the popular title is Nancy Drew's *The Hardy Boys*.

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Charlene: *The Hardy Boys*, yes.

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Li Kok: That's why I just wonder where children can find books about our own culture. I really see this, as also our society has moved more towards English education, I find there is a lack of this kind of book in English. So, although, actually personally I am Chinese, I know Chinese culture very well, but I went to SU (Singapore University). And actually in SU I realized many people actually don't understand Chinese culture. That actually was a culture shock to me, there's a lot of Chinese people [who] don't understand our own culture. So there's this thinking in me, you know, deep inside that, I think there's a demand, there's also my responsibility to properly produce this kind of book, introduce Asian culture to our people. At that time, I was just thinking of this cultural traffic, you know, that we as British colony, actually a lot of culture is one way. We receive a lot of Western influence, and actually we know less our own culture. So at that time I was thinking of, er, maybe we can do something, you know, in my generation to counter this traffic, you know, that I used publish some books about our culture, and then sell to the region and to the world. That's how the objective lah, the motivation to set up Asiapac.

So at first we have a lot of writers come in and then we do publish a lot of books in random. But later on I find the sales of this book is not very good, usually we lost money. So later I have a more organised way that I plan, you know let's say, oh, now I want to do a series, let's say origin of Chinese culture, then I will get writer to write then later, because most of the manuscript is in Chinese, so later we need translator. So I work with a group of translators, and some of them are actually in China. So it's slowly we build up our title, and also slowly we try different way of packaging. And as, because I, I love comics, but my kind of, the kind of comics I love is not the Max magazine, the Western, is more the Chinese kind of, they call it 小人书 [Children's picture story book], it's a small book, actually it's half the A5 size, very handy, you know, and then one page one illustration. I have all these books during my primary school library, a few hundred of them, and I read all, and you know, I have this memory of them and I thought, actually I learned a lot from this classic comics and it enabled me to later on to get in touch of the original classic in a very young age. So I thought maybe I can try comics. And later on, the sales of comic, it's just overwhelming. Usually, literally, what, maybe, we might sell 1000. Now we don't have any books adopted to the school, but the comic books, you know, during the 80s', is something new. So it started by some artists from Taiwan, Mr. Cai Zhi Zhong, he have transcript the Chinese philosophy into comics and it's a top seller, he sells millions in Taiwan and China. I read the book, I love it. So we contacted him and he just kindly give us his rights. After we did a lot of books about Chinese culture, then some people say, "Why don't you work with Singapore artists?" So I started to contact the local artists and also in the community, Malaysia artists also. So I start to work with them and then we explore uh, more title. So that few years, we have came out a few hundred titles.

MORE ON THE ROLE OF THE PUBLISHER AND WORKING WITH WRITERS

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Charlene: As a publisher, I would think one of the important things in time, in terms of managing is also your relationship with writers. Could you share a little bit about how you as a publisher manage your relationship with the writers?

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Eck Kheng: I always tell potential writers who come to me and want to be published that they have to choose their publishers carefully, because this is almost a marriage. If you don't trust the person, if you don't trust me as a publisher, if you don't like me as a publisher, then we can't work together. So there must be mutual respect and openness of communication. And I'm happy to say that most of my authors have become good friends. Most standard publishing contracts have a clause that says you must show the publisher your next book, first rights of refusal, but I have purposely taken that clause out because if you don't want to work with me anymore and I exercise that clause to force you to work with me, what's the point? You know, so I've taken it out and if for some reason or another, you no longer want to work with me, that's fine. But the continuation of the relationship always makes the next book better and richer because there's a deeper understanding and a better working relationship.

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Charlene: I think what's interesting is you're also known for having contracts that are quite flexible with each writer. It's not like every writer gets the same contract, right. So for example...

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Eck Kheng: My... my accountant hates me. Yeah, so we try to keep to the standard form most of the time. And if you want to, to, to, change a particular clause for one reason or another, it has to be a very, very good reason, or else it's very difficult to administer contracts for different books. And also you need to be, you want to be fair to everybody, to all the authors you work with. So unless you have a really, really good reason, then I would say it's a standard form.

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Charlene: So that was for Landmark, but how about you for Asiapac books? Like how has your management of the writers, like the relationship between the writers?

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Li Kok: Actually at the end or later stage, we commissioned writer, and we commissioned artists also, so it's like a one-off payment. Although most of the contracts are similar, of course they are the popular artists, they got pay more, but usually we have quite standard kind of contract for everybody, so it's easier for us to manage. And we always look for long-term relationship like you know, once we work with somebody we would like to carry on. So that for artists, I will usually decide a topic they specialise, you know, then they will pursue that area, so there's no competition with the different artists, you see? All the artists have their specialty, so they can come out their best also. And there is no competition.

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Charlene: So in informing these kinds of long-term relationships with your writers, is writer development something that you as a publisher think about? Or is it solely like for the writer to do on their own?

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Eck Kheng: The second book must be always better than the first book. And if the author has developed some trust and respect with his editor, then the editor can provide the feedback. So editors, like your author's first readers, I think publishers do contribute to, to author development, not only in, in what they write about, but also the author as a person. So for the longest time, I thought a book publisher's role was to publish books. Then I came to realize that actually no, a book publisher's role is to publish authors. And I think that is a very sharp distinction. You're really looking at the person who sits down and works and produces the material that becomes publishable. And that person is not only just a person who writes, but it's a whole being, right? Because even if you are a poet or a novelist or cookbook writer, you are drawing from your own experience, and looking after and befriending someone and understanding what he's going through is very important.

MORE ON THE BENEFITS OF STAYING AS A SMALL/BOUTIQUE PUBLISHING HOUSE IN SINGAPORE

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Charlene: I think earlier, um, Eck Kheng, you mentioned that one reason you started Landmark was to help writers avoid the bureaucracy of like bigger publishing houses. So how do you think the structure and size of a company affects the operations and how they work with writers?

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Eck Kheng: So I think for smaller publishing companies, you... you probably be able to meet and work with a publisher or someone who makes the decisions. So the response time is not only quicker, but more immediate because the person, the boss decides, right? So the larger the company, unless the editor is empowered to negotiate or make choices, then you have to go in and seek approval from your superiors.

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Charlene: How about for you, Li Kok? Do you feel like the size of the operations affects how you work with writers?

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Li Kok: Small is beautiful. I think for publishing houses, small is really more personal. You know everybody in, in how to say, firsthand. So there's more understanding, not like the big company. Even like Times (Publishing), you know, from Federal Times to Marshall you know. There are so many companies in between, SMP Press or whatever. So even the editor also gets very confused themselves. But for us, we know our title, we know the writer, so it's really a different kind of relationship, which the writer wants to work with us. It's more personal. That's why we can promise them.

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Eck Kheng: When I was thinking of starting Landmark Books, I met Edward England. He was a publisher for Hodder and Stoughton Christian Books. And he gave me one piece of advice. It's very simple. He said: "Keep it as small as possible, for as long as possible." And you know, I've kept small and I'm very grateful for that piece of advice because, you know, overall you know, you are more nimble. So it's... it's the way to do it.

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Charlene: So when you were both like individually working on the company as yourself as like a one person team, where did you get your knowledge from in terms of the kind of structures? Like what kind of structures did you consider for yourself, for your companies in terms of what you're going to do, what you're going to start with? Did you just throw everything and see what happens?

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Eck Kheng: As I said, I had the advantage because, you know, I worked with my father, then I was in Times for a year. So by the time I started Landmark Books, I already knew the ropes. So it was not, not a challenge at all.

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Charlene: Because those were all like bigger companies, right. Like in terms of the...

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Eck Kheng: But the processes are the same.

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Charlene: Okay. It's just that you just did it all by yourself.

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Eck Kheng: [00:27:00] Largely. Yes.

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Li Kok: Actually, I really knew nothing about publishing when I entered this field. So I just, ask around, you know, who can help you, your editor. So we employ editors who have some experience and also, we asked the printer. Anyway, just ask around, ask how to say, the Chinese say “不耻下问”: don't feel shy to ask if you don't know. So even I have met, you know, editors because at that time, there was a society of editors and we know a lot of editors. So I have, sometimes I make appointment with them and tell them I know nothing about publishing, but I really like to do. But I say, I have to make it clear, I will not employ you because we can't afford to. Yeah. And many people are very kind. I say most of the people, almost all the people I ask are very kind and they just share with me. They don't see me as a rival, you know, or they don't feel offended. Like I say, I will not employ them, then why should I share with them lunch, you know, just for like \$10, why should I share with you so much? But they are very kind. They, they see my sincerity, they just share with me. They draw out the structure and tell me what, how to manage, you know, all the problem.

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Charlene: Were there like specific mentors that maybe you looked up to or that you could bounce ideas off during that period in the eighties?

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Eck Kheng: I guess the answer is no.

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Li Kok: I think we all have to find our own way, but I would have to say my printer have helped me a lot. And I have to give credit to just now say Superskill. Superskill were my typesetter and also later on, they helped me to digitise my department and I start my car desktop publishing in-house and actually they lost the business. Because last time, produce a comic books, you can't believe one page, you know, including the print-out, is about at least \$25. So one book is thousands of dollars, you know. And I'll just say one book, we pay thousands of dollars, one computer, you know, by the time the computer is more expensive. So it is like say, even if let's say \$8,000, if I just print no, like produce five books, it will cover the cost already. [00:29:39] Mrs Tan is very kind but she also sells computers. So she shows the computer and teaches us the whole technology and later on, we just don't use the service anymore so

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Eck Kheng: And Mrs Tan has now become a publisher.

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Charlene: Which publisher is she with right now?

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Eck Kheng: I think she publishes under the name Superskill.

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Li Kok: She actually helped people to publish. Let's say, you are a writer now, she can do one stop. She can typeset and then find a printer and produce a book. You might be a self-published person, but she will help you to go through the whole process. So... so I just think it is through the help of everybody. I think the situation is we are not in the educational publishing. If we are in the textbook assessment, then there is more....com..... how to say, more competition. Yeah. The other person will say: I help you, You might take away my market shares. So they will be reluctant to help you. But our book is kind of, one of the kind, you know. Nobody produces these kinds of books you see and they're not likely to produce, even let's say, one of your books can sell, then they will say, but how long can you sell. They, they always ask this question because they are thinking of long-term, you see. If they are doing [00:31:00] textbooks, you know, they reprint every year. If they

have the, let's say specialised in mathematics, specialised in English, then they can produce every year and revise every five years, follow the MOE. But our book is, every book is a new book, you know? So we even can't tell the sales of the next book. Even if the last 10 books sell well, it doesn't mean the number 11 will sell well, so they really don't see us as a competition.

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Charlene: Something you said earlier struck me, which was that back then, there was like a society of editors and...

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Li Kok: Yeah, and then later it closed.

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Charlene: Yeah. But I'm also wondering, because I was introduced to the Sing Lit scene, the Singapore Literature scene, in the 2000s, where it already started becoming very community-based. What was that like in the 1980s? Did the publishers talk to one another? I mean, beyond like what you're talking about, like where you can talk to like the printers, the editors, but did, you know, did the individual companies interact with one another? What was it like?

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Eck Kheng: I think, not that we were less friendly, but they were just, um, I think, less opportunity to interact. So compared to now, you know, you have the SingLit movement and it's very telling because it's only through this SingLit movement that you have everybody from authors to, uh, distributors and retailers, and everyone in between sitting together around a table and talking about strategies and how to promote, in this particular case, Singapore literature. So that is a very new development and the fact that it's a new development is very telling.

DISCUSSING PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR BOOKS DURING THE 1980S AND 1990S

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Charlene: So for those of you who are new to the term, the SingLit movement used to be called the #BuySingLit movement as well, they rebranded in 2021. So I guess in terms of being a publisher now, like, I mean, the publishers that I know, including you as well, do events and programming for the writers, was this something that you did back in the eighties as well?

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Eck Kheng: I think you always try to go to schools, um, by going to schools was not a given that you will sell books. It really depends on the school and the teacher in charge. So in a very good case, they will allow you to sell the books. They will give the students adequate information about the author in the book. And also tell the students when this is going to happen. So, you know, if, if they're interested in me, just bring extra pocket money, so that, that's the best. The worst case scenario is some schools and some teachers treat you like a relief teacher. So you're just there to look after the kids for a lesson time. And then the kids have no idea that this thing is happening until it happens. So therefore it means that they are unprepared mentally. And also if they're interested in buying the books, they don't have the money. So it really depends, very much depends on, how willing the publisher is to work with the schools and to understand constraints and all that. So NAC has "Words Go Round" and Sing Lit Station has "Book A Author" (Book A Writer). And I think it's a case of educating the schools and teachers so that they are more able to help promote reading and the love for books. And the test for me is very simple. You have succeeded in promoting reading and love for books if the child wants to buy it, wants to buy the book. That is for me, the acid test. If the child says no, after listening to you and all that I, I'm not interested, then you have not done your job.

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Charlene: So from what I'm hearing, you went mostly to schools, but were there like book launches for the public etcetera that you used to do as well?

[00:35:23]

Eck Kheng: Yes, my famous book launch story is years ago, when I was working for Eastern University's Press, we published a book on the Singapore River called *Living Legacy* (Singapore's River: A Living Legacy) Linda Berry. She was the wife of the Canadian High Commissioner and I was just out of university and very naive and didn't know the ropes. So you organise this amazing book launch, very creative, we did it by the Singapore River. We had her appear at the venue by bumboat and all sorts of large diplomatic comms in attendance. And what didn't I do? I didn't apply for a license. But you know, it's... it's done. You just do it right. And good thing, we didn't get into trouble and we had very good newspaper coverage. And I was thinking, oh, if I get into trouble, then I get more newspaper coverage.

[00:36:22]

Charlene: This is the book that you also won first prize for the design work.

[00:36:24]

Eck Kheng: Yeah. Actually looking at it now, it is really horrendous. So, which also is very telling, right? Because book design has improved tremendously from those days.

[00:36:36]

Charlene: So I am just curious because you mentioned schools, was that, uh, kind of a marketing strategy that you had for Adrian Tan's book *The Teenage Textbook* and Workbook?

[00:36:45]

Eck Kheng: *The Teenage Textbook* just took off because it just, you know, it, it spoke to people's hearts. There was a connection. And even now the, the, the book is, is many, many, many years old. It was published in the eighties, right so. And, but it still resonates. And the fact that MediaCorp felt that it was material to make a TV series shows that it still resonates. So teenagers might have different fads, but the issues are still the same.

[00:37:21]

Li Kok: I achieved it because I have been involved in The Publisher Association and also The Book Council. I have a different perspective. That's why I mentioned during the 60s, after independence, actually to the help of encouragement by the UNESCO, we set up the Book Development Council and The Publisher Association. So actually their age are almost the same about the fifties. So as I involve, I, we went to oversee, so there's a lot of communication for me with the other publishers and also the publishers of other countries in the region also, or in the world, you know prospective. And also The Book Council, at the time, worked with the National Library, and we have a very successful book fair. So the book fair also, we launch books and we bring the reader together. So it's exciting times, I feel that it is, you know. And although there are conflicts between different publishers, but on the surface, we still work together until you know, until I think later on things happen in our day. Some problem with the association, then we split, then later we come back together. I think today is a new game and a new, new way of connect. So just now I keep on talking about the SingLit, actually it's more the communication in between the writer and the focus of Singapore Literature. But just now what I mentioned is more general books scenes. There's a lot of things going on, but today, as they are more variety of like Singapore, I think there are some YouTubers also, now actually a lot of new digital channel presentation. So they invited these new people who have tried the new channel to have a meeting. I think there are more these kinds of activities should be organized, where the reader can meet with the new channel. I, I think, although the eighties actually, there's a lot of things going on also, but today we should have more as we have, besides the bigger population, also we have more educated generation. We have a lot of potential in the year to come.

[00:39:46]

Charlene: So you mentioned that in the eighties, they were like, you know, a lot of these events and things like that. On average, for example, how many events or launches would you have in a year, just to give everyone a sense of, I guess, the frequency of which it may happen?

[00:40:00]

Li Kok: In the eighties, we'll just say because of the book fair, so book fair, of course, is a major event where books are launched. But there's a lot of things in the library also where after 20 years of building up now, since we set up in the late 60, so after 20 years we kind of mature. So there are a lot of things going on there. A lot of book launches also.

[00:40:29]

Eck Kheng: Yeah. I agree with Li Kok. I mean, in those days, most of the launches were at the book fairs. So going back to the *Eh, Goondul* story, so we publish *Eh, Goondul* and we did it at that time, it was quite a large print run, maybe 3 - 5 thousand. I don't remember. And we announced that Paik Joo would be at the book fair and at a particular time and like half an hour before the time, it was pandemonium. It was packed! And she really had to push her way through to get to the table. And at the time, nobody knew what she looked like, nobody knew who she was. And she fought away through the table. And that, that afternoon we saw the entire print run. It was... it was astounding.

[00:41:21]

Charlene: Was that one of the largest, like quickest sales?

[00:41:23]

Eck Kheng: I think in my experience for the number of books sold at one particular place, it certainly is the record that I know of.

[00:41:37]

Charlene: And were these book fairs the ones that were done by the National Book Development Council?

[00:41:39]

Li Kok: A joint venture of Publishers Association, and The Book Council. With the help of the National Library.

[00:41:49]

Charlene: So you mentioned earlier that you are also part of the SBPA, like the founding committee member. How did the forming of SBPA kind of help with publishing?

[00:42:00]

Li Kok: I think certainly there's an advantage now where you have organisation and you try to bring people together. So for people who like to do publishing, you would have somewhere to go, you know. So let's say somebody wants to be a publisher. Then they say maybe I join this association and I can get some information, you know, because the association have contact with the government and also with the world. So we have the information about the book fair in the region and the world and the people are encouraged to participate.

[00:42:38]

Eck Kheng: I think in Singapore, as publishers, we are very fortunate because there are so many government grants available. It's not only from National Arts Council for literary works, but National Heritage Board, and... and other grants that publishers can apply for. So in that way, publishers should be able to... to take more risks, right? For, for the less commercial work, because at least that's the policy I adopt. If the work is commercial, then there's no need for me to go and apply for government grants. It's only when the work is, is worthy of publication and perhaps less commercial. Then I feel more comfortable to publish if I have a grant. So we are very fortunate.

MORE ON BECOMING THE FIRST SINGAPOREAN PUBLISHING FIRM TO PRINT ON RECYCLED PAPER

[00:43:39]

Charlene: So in 1991, Landmark Books became the first Singaporean Publishing Firm to print its publications on recycled paper, which is quite ahead of the curve. About 30 years before sustainability became a trend for companies. It was a reprint of Simon Tay's *Stand Alone*, in which 100% recycled paper was used for the cover and 51% for the pages. This came at a high cost. The recycled paper cost eight times more than the original glossy cover in 1991. And usually only for reprints in order to ensure that there is demand. So maybe I'd like to ask Eck Kheng, what is your motivation for this push for sustainability using recycled materials?

[00:44:13]

Eck Kheng: Simon's wife, Jun Hwa, is so far ahead of everybody in terms of recycling and looking after the environment. So she was very persuasive and I looked around and at that time, everything was printed in standard wood-free, which is like what photosetting paper is today, right. So books published in Singapore didn't look like books published in the UK because you know, the, the paper stock was different and it just screamed out "published from Singapore" and, and, and it, it, it didn't have an international quality to it. And that time, other people's thoughts were not easy to come by. And there was this recycled paper store, and it looked right. It looked right. So we used it, but, you know, you learned very quickly that that sort of recycled paper foxes very easily. So "foxing" is when the paper becomes yellow around the edges. So again, that was a problem, but now, you know, we had to thank paper merchants, like RJ paper, who brings in a wide range of, of papers suitable for different types of publications from novels to... to... uh, art books. And it's, it's so nice to have a variety of materials to choose from.

[00:45:38]

Charlene: Thank you so much for both your times, and for sharing with us all your little anecdotes and then your insights as well into what publishing was like in the 1980s. So we have come to the end of our episode. For those of you who are listening to us, this has been our episode on publishing the 1980s with Mr. Eck Kheng from landmark books, as well as Ms. Lim Li Kok from AsiaPac books. So thank you both so much.

[00:46:04]

Serene: You've just come to the end of another episode of Backlogues, an arts management podcast series. Thank you for listening! If you'd like to learn more about any of the key events, people, and institutions mentioned in this particular episode, head over to our website at Backlogues.sg - that's b a c k l o g u e s dot s g - to find further information pertaining to each episode's content. You may find them under "Show Notes" on the respective pages for each episode. For more resources with regard to arts management in Singapore, head to the Resources page on the website.

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