

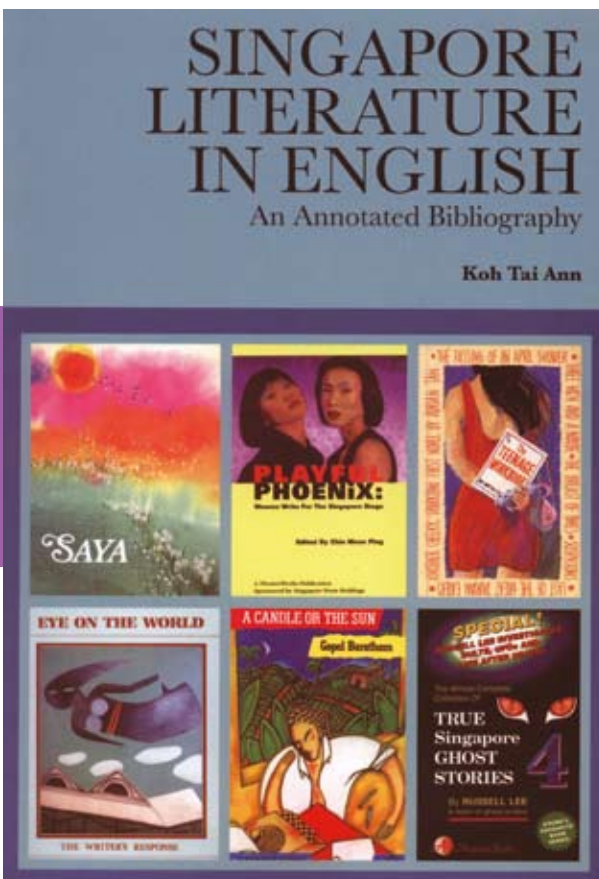
Book Review

Singapore English Literature



by CHENG U WEN LENA

Former Librarian and
Retired Publisher/Bookseller



Koh Tai Ann. Compiler and Editor. Singapore, A joint publication by National Library Board Singapore and Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University. Singapore. 2008. 280p.

Singapore Literature in English: An Annotated Bibliography, compiled and edited by Koh Tai Ann, is a welcome and long-awaited reference tool that writers, readers and teachers of literature as well as academics, researchers, librarians, book traders and the general public, will find useful, in different ways.

This bibliography lists altogether 1,204 annotated entries and is published in a handsome volume of 280 pages. Bibliographic entries are arranged by literary genre such as: novels, short stories, poetry, drama, anthologies and miscellaneous. Next come sections arranged by form, such as: periodicals, electronic journals and author biographies. Finally, there are two separate author and title indexes.

To me this bibliography is outstanding in several ways:

- The compiler-editor herself states in the introduction: " This is the first annotated and most comprehensive bibliography to date of the entire body of "Singapore literature in English".
- Scope and coverage of the bibliography and the criteria for inclusion or exclusion of authors and works are clearly

delineated and vigorously applied.

- The bibliography shows in-depth subject knowledge and appreciation of the materials selected.
- The user-friendly arrangement allows for multiple entry points for bibliographic searches.
- Finally, there are unexpected bonuses.

COMPREHENSIVENESS

This is the first bibliography to adopt the more inclusive term "Singapore literature" instead of "creative writing" or "critical writing" of the seven earlier bibliographies published between 1976 and 2000. This is significant as Koh Tai Ann, the compiler-editor, clarifies that there is now a considerable body of literature that can be identified as Singapore literature and not just "creative writing" by beginner writers. Comprehensiveness is also achieved as selection of entries is non-prescriptive and no literary criticism is applied. So long as writing is imaginative or "creative" and falls under any of the literary genre, for example, short story, novel, poetry, etc, it is included.

SCOPE, COVERAGE AND SELECTIVITY

In the Introduction, Koh Tai Ann describes in great detail the scope and coverage that delineate the bibliography, as well as the criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Writers who are Singaporean by birth and citizenship, or are permanent residents are included. If political identity is not known, but the book is set in Singapore – the work is included. “Diasporic” writers are excluded if they have been “claimed” by the countries of their adoption. Exceptions to this rule are made for authors such as Goh Poh Seng, who have a considerable body of works before they emigrated, or who, like Ho Ming Fong, have received awards and have maintained literary ties in Singapore. Works excluded are: literary essays and criticism, non-fiction works like biographies and autobiographies, children’s books, humour, and works in English translation. December 2007 is the cut-off date.

IN-DEPTH SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE

This bibliography has the rare combination of a compiler-editor who is also a professor of English literature who has extensive experience in teaching and writing about the materials that are selected. In addition, a team of experienced librarians and bibliographers assists her. Users of this bibliography will no doubt benefit from the literary comments that are embedded in the notes.

For example, in Goh Poh Seng’s *If We Dream Too Long* (Entry #60, p.29), the Notes state that this title is “considered to be Singapore’s first ‘serious’ novel in English.” It won the National Book Development Council of Singapore Award (for Fiction), 1976, and is translated into Russian, Tagalog and Japanese.

Another example, *The Straits Chinese Magazine: A Quarterly Journal of Oriental and Occidental Culture* (Entry #1187, p.229). The Notes explain that the editors Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang published the magazine “as an avenue of expression for non-Europeans in the then British colony of Singapore.” It became defunct after 11 issues [1897-1907]. The short stories in the magazine are the earliest published fiction in English in Singapore. They have been compiled by Philip Holden with an Introduction at <http://www.scholars.news.edu.sg/resources/scminindex.html>.

Ho Minfong’s *Sing to the Dawn* merits six entries (Entry #88-93, p.34-35) for different editions. The Notes provide details of the book’s many achievements. The book was first published in 1976 in the United States where it won the first prize awarded by the Council of Interracial Books for Children Book Awards. Subsequently it was republished in Singapore and has since been adopted as a school literary text. In 1996, it was adapted for a musical by Stephen Clark and Dick Lee for the Singapore Festival of Arts. In 2008, Raintree Pictures made an animated film based on the book. Kwoncjian Ho, the illustrator of the first edition, is credited.

From such insightful Notes, one catches glimpses of Singapore’s literary history, as well as the success and literary significance of individual works.

USER FRIENDLY ARRANGEMENT

This is a user friendly bibliography as it provides several points of entry for the user to search for information. The main body of the bibliography is classified by literary genre and by form. This arrangement allows the user to make a quick estimate that, say,

short story writing is the most popular literary form, followed by novels. However, one also needs to note that this may be due to the “padding up” by Russell Lee and Pugelenthi Sr., two prolific ghost story writers.

The Author Index and the Title Index give the user two additional entry points for information searches. The Author Index allows the user to ascertain the spread of an author’s work across literary genre. The provision of National Library call numbers provides instant accessibility to the titles required.

UNEXPECTED BONUS

This bibliography provides many features that one does not normally expect to find in works of this kind. These surprise “gifts”, will no doubt be appreciated by users, and will save researchers hours of tedious information gathering.

In addition to the “Abstract”, “Notes” and “Contents” are provided where necessary. Abstracts summarise the key contents of a work, whereas “Notes” provide additional information about the author and the work, for example, what literary prizes were awarded, whether adapted for theatre or television or selected for school adoption; where and when the play was performed. “Contents” list the individual authors and titles that are found in a particular collection of Short Stories or Anthology. Student and first-time writers will probably appreciate this feature, as this is where they are likely to see, for the first time, their names in print.

The bibliography also lists unpublished works, drafts and working copies of theatre scripts, sometimes even with director’s notations. Also included are ephemera (or “fugitive material” in library jargon), some of which are from the compiler’s personal collection. These are mostly printed programmes of public readings by poets and authors.

In keeping with current technological developments, provision is made for inclusion of sections on: Electronic journals and Internet Sources. Finally, full-colour illustrations of selected book covers give added colour to the bibliography

Bibliographies are normally not meant to be read. However, for the purpose of writing this book review, I have had to scan and read this work more diligently. I have found the task more enjoyable and rewarding than anticipated. As a long time librarian and bookseller/publisher (1960-2004), I have discovered many titles I did not know existed. Hence we need to be aware that the computer revolution has “democratised” the printing and publishing industry. Today, anyone who can master the keyboard and mouse can self-publish. Such works, though published, are unfortunately, harder to locate, for want of a hospitable distribution channel. It also deserves to be priced and sold, as this sometimes facilitates its dissemination. While it is evident that the bibliography is compiled based essentially on the collection at the National Library of Singapore, this important bibliographic process needs to be clearly stated.

To me, this bibliography is a MUST for every library, large or small. I congratulate Koh Tai Ann, the compiler-editor, and her team of librarians for a highly professional piece of work, and the National Library Board and NTU Centre for Liberal Arts and social Sciences for their vision in sponsoring this publication.

This bibliography is available upon request from the Level 11 Information Counter of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, National Library.