

Way to a mobile future

Victor Keegan

Johannes Gutenberg's development of moveable type in the 15th century paved the way for mass production – and the revolution is continuing in the digital age with computers, mobile phones and e-reader devices. Having begun as an illuminated manuscript read by an elite few, the book may one day not exist in physical form yet be read by billions of people on mobile devices.

We are so used to digital miracles we have become blasé. It passed almost without notice that, at least in the US and Canada, up to one million Google-scanned books can now be read on Sony's e-book device, the Reader. You don't have to read them on a mobile device; you can read them on a computer screen or print them through a website.

The reaction of publishing companies to the digital revolution was almost as antediluvian as the music industry's. Their failure to think about building a system to deliver books to readers enabled Amazon to do it for them. Most of the new ways of reading – especially with dedicated e-book readers such as those from Sony, Amazon's Kindle, and a host of iPhone and Google applications – have been created by outsiders.

This has resulted in near-monopolies for Google and Amazon, which now owns both Audible.com, which has more than 90 per cent of the audio book market, and AbeBooks.com, the biggest online seller of second-hand books. Such concentration of power is one reason book buyers have yet to benefit from the low prices that ought to follow from the near-zero costs of digital delivery.

What's more, with digital delivery, you're not buying a book you can lend to others but the right to read it on a device.

If book ownership is in danger of waning, book reading may increase thanks to new devices. Amazon has a bigger Kindle e-reader, while Sony is about to reveal two improved products. There are lots of new readers for the iPhone.

Publisher Canongate is to release an iPhone version of Australian rock star Nick Cave's new novel, *The Death of Bunny Munro*, created with Enhanced Editions to incorporate audio and video of the author. This is part of a new genre of multimedia books from the likes of vook.com (still in testing mode) that brings video and books together on the Web.

Apple's rumoured iPhone tablet with a 10-inch (25.4cm) screen should make reading more pleasurable than the much smaller iPhone. Its back-lit LCD will put it at a disadvantage compared to e-paper readers that can be used in bright sunlight. On the other hand, it will be in colour.

That will be perfect for reading one of those medieval illuminated manuscripts. But this is where we came in. *Guardian News & Media*

Singaporean poet Cyril Wong tells **Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop** about the painful transition to his short story debut

Short, not sweet

After publishing seven poetry collections, Cyril Wong has written his first book of short stories, *Let Me Tell You Something About That Night: Strange Tales*. But even though the poet is happy with the result, he admits he hated the new writing process.

"It was a very painful six months. The characters haunted me for too long and I don't like that feeling. When I write something I like to put it down and put it away. With a poem, when it's over, it's over," says the 32-year-old Singaporean.

The 2006 Singapore Literature Prize Winner's debut collection of short fiction includes stories of a little girl and a talking moon, a lonely elf and a prince, and a butterfly that wants to be a rabbit, but these are not fairy tales for children. The themes of lost love, loneliness and homosexuality are aimed at an adult readership. "I suffer from depression and I feel those issues need to be discussed. I was very determined to write stories that are dark, but there is also a struggle towards a kind of light in many of them, so it's balanced. But there are no real happy endings," he says.

Reading Wong's work provides a window into the writer's personal life and angst. Openly gay, Wong has long favoured what he calls "confessional poetry", talking about his personal experience and difficulties coming out in a

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traditional Christian Chinese family; his father has not talked to him since he came out 14 years ago, and his mother is in "self-denial".

"My family is a psychological mess, but because we're Asians we don't really talk about it," he says. "It's all about saving face. I'm the only one spilling everyone's guts through my writing."

The themes in Wong's writing have developed over the years. In his first two collections of poetry, *Squatting Quietly* (2000) and *The End of His Orbit* (2001), the young author mainly dealt with his response to the breakdown of his relationships with family members and the absence of a father figure in his life. But he has grown more philosophical, writing about how the city state has shaped him and expanding beyond issues of sexuality to embrace themes of love, mortality and alienation.

In his last book of poems, *Tilting Our Plates to Catch the Light*, published in 2007, Wong imagined what it would be like if he and his partner were both HIV positive, transforming the two of them in his writing into two shape-shifting Hindu deities.

Wong attributes his two-year

publishing hiatus to a desire to "take a break" after constantly travelling to literary festivals. He has also started a PhD research scholarship in English literature at the National University of Singapore.

Wong's sense of isolation and alienation remains evident in many of the 16 tales that make up *Let Me Tell You Something About That Night: The Sleeping Prince*, for example, tells the story of an elf who falls in love with a prince, who in turn is in love with a fisherman's daughter. To capture the prince's attention, the elf kills the young

delicious to give up, because fairy tales are always sexist, homophobic and with a happy ending, and I wanted to subvert the moral of happy endings."

Early in his career, Wong ran afoul of Singapore's censors: they threatened to pull National Arts Council funding from his second volume owing to its homosexual content, but he went on to win the Singapore Literary Prize for *Unmarked Treasure*, which he felt helped vindicate his work and was sweet "revenge" against all those who told him he would not succeed because of the themes he explored.

"It's not just about being gay; it is also about talking about oneself. Asians don't talk about themselves, about how their father doesn't love them anymore – well, unless you're Asian-American and then you can write anything. The younger generation of readers is fine with that, but the older generation feels uncomfortable," he says.

"Confessional poetry is very much frowned upon by all the serious literary people here. They believe poetry has to say something about Singapore, talk about the process of national-identity formation, celebrate the names of neighbourhoods. It's very much a kind of social poetry, which is encouraged by publishers," he says.

Wong is now working on a new book of poems about dreams, titled *Oneiros*, which will be published next month.

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Cyril Wong on writing short stories

woman and, with the help of a witch, takes over the victim's body, living the rest of his life as a woman to land his prince.

"These tales stem from a deep-rooted ambivalence I have about love, about life, about what it means to live a meaningful life. Sometimes, I think there is no such thing as a meaningful life," Wong says.

"For me the contrast between that and the fairy tales was too