

Komsas reading list

The Interlok debate has raised the key question of how books are selected as texts for the literature component of Bahasa Malaysia in schools.

SUZIEANA UDA NAGU has the details

A BOOK — with memorable characters and a riveting plot — often stays indelibly imprinted on the readers' minds long after they have finished the last chapter.

Malay novel *Seteguh Karang* by Tuan Faridah Syed Abdullah has that effect on advertising executive Amri Yusof who read it at age 16.

"I remember how the main character Awanis was forced to single-handedly care for her siblings at such a young age after her parents died," says the 26-year-old.

Amri is among the first batch of secondary school students in Terengganu, Kelantan, Pahang and Malacca to study the novel in school as part of the literature component of Bahasa Malaysia (or Komsas) introduced nationwide a decade ago.

Komsas was mooted in 1999 to instil the reading habit in young Malaysians and promote a better appreciation of Malay literary works among them.

The idea is to expose schoolchildren of all ethnicities

to Malay literature and hopefully a new cohort of literary enthusiasts and talents will emerge.

The local creative writing industry needs a revival and young Malaysians who have learned to express their creativity through the literature component taught in schools will be able to fill the gap.

Komsas was introduced in classrooms to first- and fourth-formers in 2001.

It is taught twice a week during Bahasa Malaysia period which lasts 40 minutes.

The heated debate over the choice of Datuk Abdullah Hussain's novel *Interlok* as the text for the literature component of Bahasa Malaysia beginning this year has raised the key question of how are books selected as texts for this particular subject? (see *Learning Curve*, Jan 23)

Universiti Putra Malaysia Malay language department lecturer Associate Professor Dr Lim Swee Tin refutes the suggestion that *Interlok* had not

been reviewed for its suitability as a Komsas text.

"Before the abridged version of *Interlok* was selected as required reading for fifth-formers this year, the novel had already been used in its entirety as a Malay Literature text by sixth-formers who sat for the Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia examination between 1976 and 1985.

"It was used in schools for nine years with no objections," he says.

Lim is one of the authors and academicians involved in the Komsas reading materials evaluation process in 2008.

Interlok is among more than 700 novels, poems, drama and traditional prose evaluated for secondary schoolchildren's use that year.

Lim, who is also a poet and winner of the Southeast Asia Write award in 2000, maintains that all works of literature submitted to the Education Ministry's Curriculum Development Centre for evaluation undergo strict

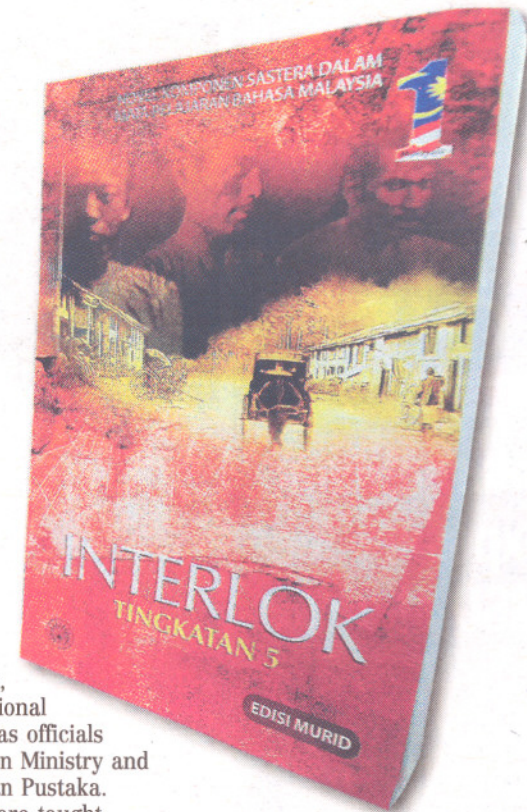
procedures to determine their suitability (see H3).

"Komsas reading materials were filtered at multiple levels by students, teachers (of three categories: Expert, Graduate and Excellent), writers, academicians, national laureates as well as officials from the Education Ministry and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

"The ones that are taught in schools have met all the criteria," says Lim.

If works of literature nourish the soul, it is then necessary to expose young readers to materials that can broaden their outlook and build their character.

Learning literature as a component of Bahasa Malaysia in school has certainly shaped



Amri Yusof's perception of life.

"Reading in class has given me the skills to be critical of what I read. It has also nurtured my passion for writing and made me a literary and art scene enthusiast," says Amri.

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Mixed reaction to Interlok's fate

THERE has been a mixed reaction to the decision to retain with amendments the abridged edition of Datuk Abdullah Hussain's novel *Interlok* as a text for the literature component of the subject Bahasa Malaysia for fifth-formers.

Some academicians and literary enthusiasts reacted happily to the news while others voiced concern.

Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin made the announcement on Thursday, ending the impasse.

"The decision to continue using the novel with amendments so as not to hurt the feelings of the Indian community is the best solution," says Muhyiddin, who is also Education Minister.

Muhyiddin added in a statement on Thursday that an independent panel would be set up to study the types of changes to be made to the abridged version of the novel.

The review body — comprising linguists, academicians, literary figures and representatives of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka as well as the Indian community — will then submit their recommendations to the Government.



Universiti Putra Malaysia
Malay language department
lecturer Associate Professor Dr
Lim Swee Tin

"I support the Government's move as I believe it is important to establish a middle ground for the sake of teachers and students. But the decision must not be at the expense of the aesthetic of the novel. The sanctity of the literary work must not be compromised."



Kesatuan Guru-Guru Bahasa
Melayu Malaysia Barat vice-
president and teacher Mat
Jidin Ahmad

"I trust that the Government has made a sound decision. The move to retain and amend the book is perhaps the best solution to resolve the protracted dispute. However, it is crucial that the changes do not affect the storyline and its original message."



Institut Pendidikan Guru
Malaysia Kampus Bahasa
Melayu lecturer, poet and
translator Raja Rajeswari
Seetha Raman

"I respect the Prime Minister and Education Minister's decision.

As a poet and recipient of the National Literary Award, I hope the author's consent is taken into account before any amendments are done to his book."



Malay sociolinguist and the
Institute of the Malay World
and Civilisation deputy director
Professor Teo Kok Seong

"This is a win-win situation — a good midway point between those who wanted to keep the book as it is and those who want it withdrawn altogether.

This decision is also timely; now all parties should move forward. I hope that there will not be any disputes during the amendment process.

I am also happy that the book has been retained as students can learn from the positive values of the *muhibbah* spirit of the time."