

LITERATURE

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A poetic look at life

PROFESSOR Malachi Edwin Vethamani has been most prolific as a published writer of poetry and short stories.

The esteemed academic from the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC) published his first volume of poems, *Complicated Lives* last year and that was followed by the publication of his second volume, *Life Happens* earlier this year.

Last month, Vethamani launched *Coitus Interruptus and Other Stories*, his first volume of short stories at the George Town Literary Fair.

Vethamani, 62, said he has been writing creatively all his life.

"I have always been an avid reader, especially the literary classics, and the desire to write as well came naturally early on. However, for many years, I did not have the confidence in seeing my creative work published," he said.

Until last year, the internationally recognised teacher trainer and expert on Malaysian literature in English has been better known in academic circles as a critic and bibliographer.

After a 26-year stint at Universiti Putra Malaysia, he went on to be the founding dean of Wawasan Open University School of Education, Languages and Communication and Taylor's University School of Education in 2009 and 2011, respectively.

He currently teaches Modern and Contemporary British Fiction, Victorian and Fin de siècle Literature and Malaysian Literature in English for undergraduates, and World Englishes for post-graduate students at UNMC.

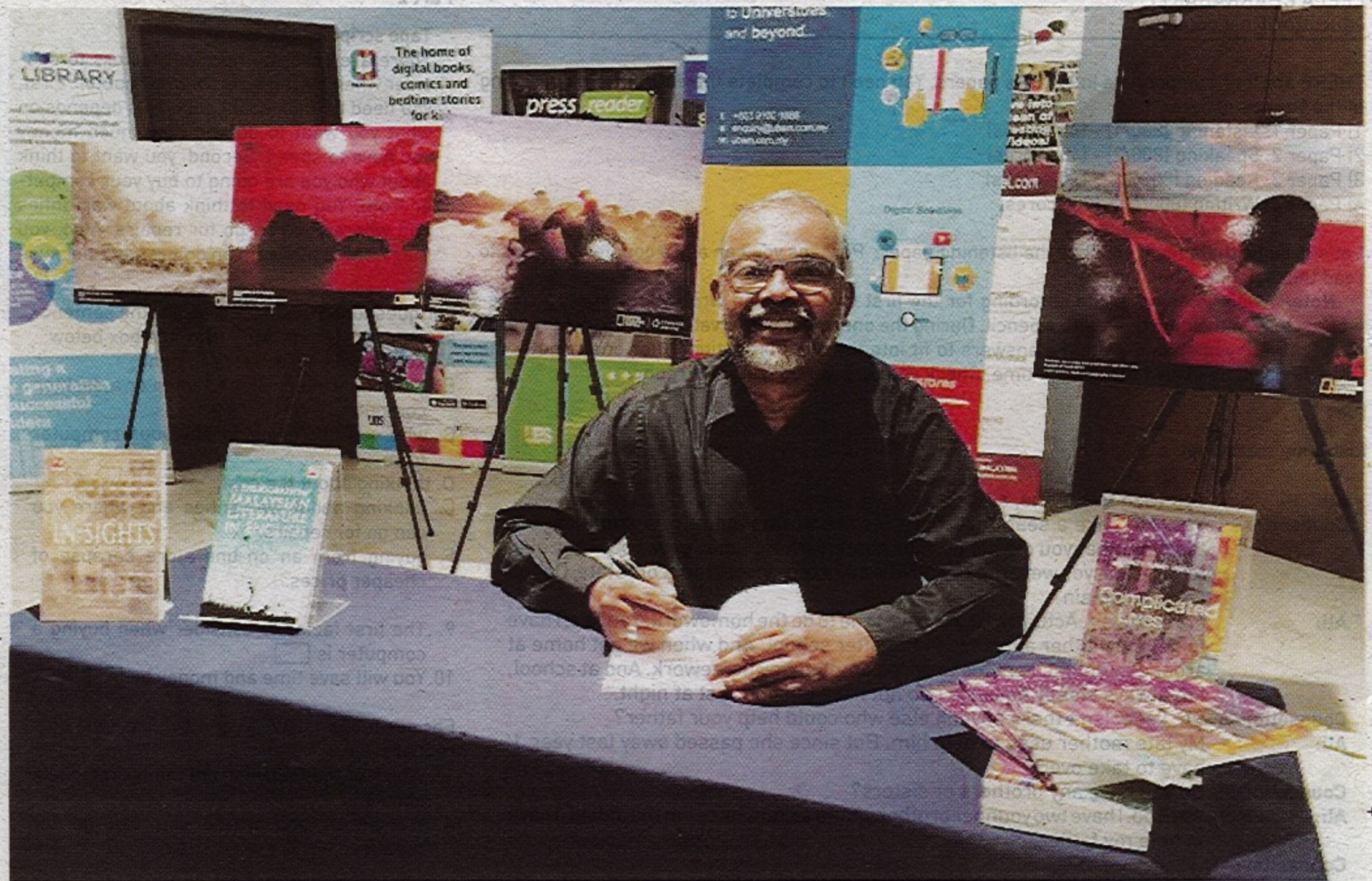
According to Vethamani, he finds Malaysian Literature in English a compelling subject because of all the new writing that is emerging in this area.

"Thanks to my years of research and work as a bibliographer, I find it exciting to observe the patterns and emerging trends in Malaysian writing in English. And closely linked to this literature is the use of both standard Malaysian English and Manglish in Malaysian writing," he said.

One of the major outcomes from this research is his edited volume, *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems*, which was published earlier this year.

"This project celebrates 60 years of Malaysian poetry and features the work of about 50 poets," said Vethamani.

In recognition of its contribution to Malaysian Literature in English, the book was launched at UNMC by Deputy Education Minister Datuk Dr



Malachi Edwin Vethamani at a book signing event.

Mary Yap Kain Ching.

For anyone keen to pursue creative writing, Vethamani's advice is to first read widely, including the literary classics.

"There is so much pleasure to be derived from reading, and one should really read what is to one's taste," he said.

"For me, that would be mainly novels, short stories, poetry and plays.

I also enjoy reading diaries and letters of such literary figures and artists like Virginia Woolf and Vincent van Gogh.

"Short stories are the best travel companions. And besides my love for poetry, I also like works by writers who are innovative and able to keep their genres 'novel' fresh."

Vethamani said that budding writers

“There is so much raw material out there, calling out to be written.”

MALACHI EDWIN VETHAMANI
UNMC professor

should first be familiar with the different ways and styles of writing, from which one can get both ideas and inspiration.

"Further exposure can be gained by attending reading sessions. Finally, before sending the work for publication, it is helpful to share it with friends to obtain opinions and reactions.

"For years, I was hesitant to show one of my poems to my brother because of its personal nature but after he read it and told me it was fine, it was included in my first volume of poetry," he said.

After publication, a further reward for the writer is getting feedback from readers saying how they felt connected to what they read.

"Recently, I gave a lecture and a reading at the National Taiwan University. Since then, the lecturer there has been sending me his students' reflections and feedback on my poems, and I am really touched and encouraged by their positive response," he added.

For Vethamani, the publication of two collections of poems and one of short stories is just the beginning of his creative writing phase.

"There is so much raw material out there, calling out to be written," he said.

It is easy to see what he means, going by the subjects and aspects of life he has touched on in his published works so far.

These range from Brickfields to Brisbane, neighbours and gangsters, desire and dementia, adultery and loneliness.

As reflected by the titles, life happens and can be complicated.

For Vethamani the writer, the most pleasant surprise to have emerged is perhaps having part of his poem posted along a pedestrian walkway in the nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur.

"To have your work read daily by the many passers-by from the world over has to be one of the most satisfying feelings a writer can have," he said.



Malachi Edwin Vethamani (second row, fifth from left) after launching his book *Coitus Interruptus and Other Stories* at the George Town Literary Festival 2016.