



Professor Malachi Edwin Vethamani (back row, fifth from left) with participants in his book tour at the National Institute of Education, Singapore.

Varsity tour to inspire budding writers

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LITERATURE not only enables students to appreciate a language, but also learn to embrace the complexities of life. Reading about people's experiences through written works can give birth to empathy and a better understanding among members of a society.

Determined to raise awareness on English literature and encouraging students to write, University of Nottingham Malaysia (UNM) professor of modern English literature and poet Dr Malachi Edwin Vethamani has embarked on a book tour to universities nationwide and abroad.

"The whole idea of the book tour is not just about my poetry books. But it's getting students to talk about literature and write," said Vethamani.

The local bard has penned two poetry collections entitled *Life Happens* and *Complicated Lives*. He also edited an anthology called *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems*.

Kicking off his literary journey at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Seremban in July last year, Vethamani had since visited 11 higher-learning institutions nationwide, including Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman and Universiti Tenaga Nasional (Uniten).

The writer also visited the National Institute of Education in Singapore, as well as National Taiwan University and National Sun Yat-sen University in Taiwan.

Vethamani's crowning glory was entitled *A Bibliography of Malaysian Literature in English*, first published in 2001, which documented the country's English literature dating back 60 years.

"Often, people will ask what do we have in Malaysian English literature?"

"We have a lot of novels, short stories, poetry and plays. I put them together as a source of reference for researchers and readers alike."

Noting that the bibliography's second edition

was released in 2016, Vethamani said: "You can see the difference. Fifteen years after the first edition, many more works have been published."

On his tour, Vethamani will engage the university students to raise awareness about literature.

"From my work, I will try to find something that would be of interest to the young people and find themes that they can connect with. I usually start with a poem called *I Will Text You*. Another popular poem of mine is called *A New Beginning*, which dealt with issues pertaining to the last general election.

"The idea is to show students that poetry is not about dead writers. It's about the present and it deals with contemporary issues."

Seeking a distinct approach in each university that he visits, Vethamani said: "I would get different students so I'd target them differently."

"I visited a language centre in UiTM, whose students were familiar with literature. When I went to Uniten, the students were mostly studying engineering and taking a literature module. At Swinburne University of Technology, I talked to science students, who formed their own reading circles."

Some of Vethamani's books have been incorporated in the syllabus of the universities he visited.

"Meeting UPM postgraduate students was quite interesting as they were learning about my book *Coitus Interruptus and Other Stories* as a part of their Malaysian Literature module.

"As the students had read my work, they asked me a lot of questions. I also received some interesting questions during my visit at the English Department of Universiti Malaya."

One of the most memorable experiences for Vethamani was when he visited Universiti Teknologi Petronas, where he spoke to 400 Foundation in Engineering students.

"The lecturers invited me as they saw how important it was to have elements of the humanities present in the sciences. Because they were not language students and there were so many of them, I decided to interact with them differently."

"Before reading my poem entitled *Boyhood Street Buffet*, I asked the students to keep an eye

on the number of food mentioned. Then, I asked, 'Does anyone of you write poems?'

"It doesn't have to be in English, as long as you're writing. Two pairs of hands went up. A boy read out an English poem while another girl shared her Malay poem. It was great that they got to share their poetry and talk about what they liked."

A popular question that Vethamani receives in his tour is whether he finds it difficult to write.

"I often tell them that writing poetry is tough, but getting it published is even tougher. There are a few options available for writers to publish. Many online journals call for submissions and you may receive feedback that will help you in your writing."

"If students have their own blogs or Facebook accounts, they can publish them there, too."

For budding writers, Vethamani shared some words of wisdom.

"I believe that a writer should read. Before you become a writer, you should read a lot."

"I started writing poetry because when I was a student, I had read a lot of poetry. I also read works by Malaysian authors like Wong Phui Nam, Ee Tiang Hong and my good friend, Shirley Lim Geok-lin, who won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize."

The good thing for aspiring writers is that they do not need special qualification to venture into this field.

"You'll find that many writers who write in English don't have a degree in English literature or creative writing. You can be a law or business graduate, and become a writer as long as you have the desire to express yourself."

"If you want to learn to write, you can opt for short writing courses. And I always tell them (budding writers) to frequent festivals like the George Town Literary Festival."

Instead of waiting for inspiration to strike, Vethamani usually looks at his surroundings.

"Sometimes, certain issues make you think and you want to give your personal take on it. I write about relationships and what I observe from people. In a way, I draw inspiration from real life. Being an Indian Malaysian male, I write in a way that readers would not say that I sound like someone else. Instead, they would go, 'He sounds like himself'."

UNM School of English dean Professor Danton Remoto said he was happy with Vethamani's effort to meet and inspire students.

"They get to meet a Malaysian writer, hear about his work and learn about Malaysian English Literature. Hopefully, he will inspire them to write, too."

Vethamani expressed his hope to cover more universities in his itinerary.

"Through this tour, I would like to expose students to poetry and short stories as a contemporary literary activity. It is my goal to create awareness about the many Malaysian writers who write in English, whom the young people should be reading."

"I also hope to encourage students to write because they can."

While preferring to write poetry, Vethamani has also penned short stories. His first story was entitled *The Kiss*, which was published after it won consolation prize in the 1995 New Straits Times Short Story Competition.



Professor Malachi Edwin Vethamani with his book, 'A Bibliography of Malaysian Literature in English' and other works.