The Growth Of Imagination in Singapore Children's Literature In English (1965 - 2005)

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My research is on imaginative Singapore Children's Literature in English (SCLE) with an emphasis on children's prose fiction, which can be divided into fantasy and realism (see Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008; Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2010). Both fantasy and realism involve two literary processing channels[1] — imagination and verisimilitude, which provide a link between the world grounded in reality and the meta-world in our minds. Through this meta-cognitive link, readers are able to experience the episodes as described in the stories and through the characters.

The term *imagination* is defined as that literary process of the mind to generate mental images of objects, states or actions not felt or experienced by the senses. Imagination is usually synonymous with "fancy, and commonly opposed to the faculty of reason, either as complementary to it or as contrary to it".[2] According to Sewall (1999) and Roth (2004), imagination helps bridge readers and their environment to create meaningful experiences and understanding of knowledge. It is a fundamental facility through which readers make sense of the world (Norman, 2000; Sutton-Smith, 1988) and also plays an important role in the learning process (Egan, 1992; Norman, 2000).

The other term *verisimilitude* (also known as *truth-likeness*) is the semblance of truth or reality in literary works or the literary principle that requires a consistent illusion of truth to life. It encompasses both the exclusion of improbabilities (as in realism) and the careful disguising of improbabilities in non-realistic works.[3] Verisimilitude also refers to the other literary process that is "often invoked in fantasy and science fiction inviting readers to pretend such stories are true by referring to objects of the mind such as fictional books or years that do not exist apart from an imaginary world" (Roth, 2004, p. 10). This imaginary world is also known as *meta-world* (Chia, 1991).

By seeing the world around them in new ways and by considering ways of living other than their own, children increase their ability to think divergently. Stories often map the divergent paths that our ancestors might have taken or that our descendants might someday take. "Through the vicarious experience of entering a world different from the present one, children develop their imaginations. In addition, stories about people, both real and imaginary, can inspire children to overcome obstacles, accept different perspectives, and formulate personal goals." (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008, p. 5)

Moreover, children's books with a high degree of *imaginativity*[4] provide the highest level of *reader enchantment*, which is an endogenous process that stimulates a reader's mind. This process throws readers into that meta-world where they can take part in any adventure, journey or exploration (Chia, 2004). It makes readers want to go on and not stop reading. In this sense, they have gone beyond automaticity. They are now a part of that story and have become either like *avatars* participating in the fantasy world, or like *morpheus* watching the events gradually unfolding. The final outcome is a sensitive awareness of imaginativity in children's literature.

Promoting SCLE by encouraging reading for pleasure among our children demands special effort in translating written language or print into *meta-worlds* (or realms of fantasy) — "worlds within worlds whose reality is primarily in the mind" (Roloff, 1973). Though a meta-world is a reality only within the mental boundaries of the mind, the existence of such realms can be readily accepted by most readers (Chia, 1991, 1996). Regardless of how peculiar or remote it may seem, readers should be sufficiently convinced that the *meta-world* really exists — they must believe in it and need to suspend their disbelief (just as if they were role-playing). This is the power of imagination that good children's literature can help promote.

The Changing Landscape (1965 – 2005)

SCLE evolved as ideas surrounding it and perspectives changed. In the past, SCLE "was largely concentrated on reading materials rather than fiction proper, [whereas] the current trend shows a

move towards better fiction though it is largely folktales and picture book fiction" (National Library Board, 2005, p. 3). For SCLE to attract a wider readership there is a need for our writers, illustrators and/or publishers to expand the scope of imagination.

My original research surveyed the changing landscape of SCLE from 1965 to 2005, using the Imaginativity Rating Scale (IRS) to measure changing levels of imaginativity. However, my focus in this article is the descriptive findings of the study; I reserve its quantitative findings for another paper. I examine the development of SCLE over time, looking for that which "would ideally represent the authentic voice of the Singapore child" (Hassan, 2006, p. 16), and the various significant historical events that affected it. I have divided the 40 years into five periods: the Didactic Period (1960s), the Pioneering Period (1970s), the Emergent Period (1980s), the Progressive Period (1990s), and the New Millennium (2000s).

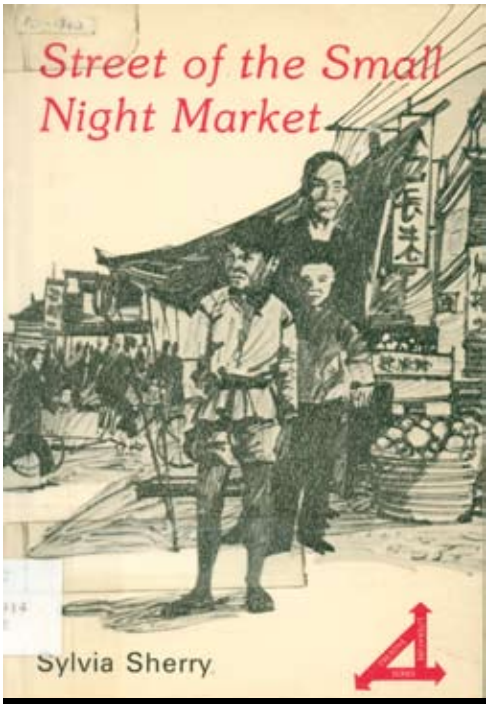
The Didactic Period (1960s)

One of the early roadblocks to the growth of Singapore children's literature has been its poor commercial viability, due to the small local market. As early as 1966, the then Minister for Education Mr Ong Pang Boon said,

> It is not only desirable but essential to have local authors write the books we need, especially authors who understand the role of authorship in relation to the new political status and urgent social needs of our country. It is only local authors who could have a sense of social awareness, a real understanding of the various aspects of the local environment and above all a true appreciation of the national aspirations and strivings of our people, and contribute by making appropriate references and allusions to local conditions and factors, and by consciously emphasising points of view more in conformity with the spirit of the times, and with our national needs and aspirations. (as cited in Girvin, 1976, p. 7)

A scan of the SCLE available during the 1960s at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library reveals that basal readers were used in many English-medium schools and outnumbered quality children's fiction on all counts. This reflected the Singapore government's policy during this period "to get the general populace to put a premium on education, and the habit of reading began to be developed as part and parcel of the learning process" (Kong & Tay, 1998, p. 8). Besides, the parents, being very pragmatic, "look only for books 'useful' in boosting their children's school performance" (Khoo, 1992, p. 101).

I was able to identify only one trade book published during this period: Sylvia Sherry's *Street of the Small Night Market* (1966). Others were merely basal readers such as the *Federal Supplementary Readers Third Year (Book 3)* (1961), the *Federal Readers Book 1* (1963), and *Structural English Course Reader 4* (1968). It was in a third course reader that I found an interesting story, *The King of Fishes* (1968) by Chia Meng Ann and Chia Hearn Chek. "Although the literature addressed reading discovery, it was positioned to address reading needs first and often the tone of the materials was didactic if not dull." (National Library Board, 2005, p. 2)



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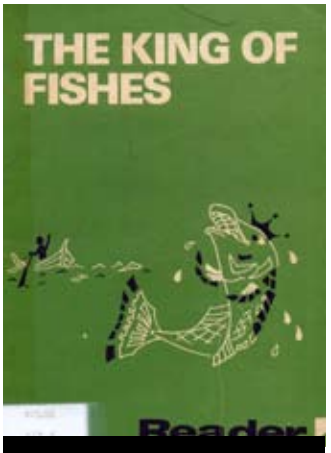
The Pioneering Period (1970s)

A serious effort to promote the writing of children's books began with the Workshop on Children's Books "organised by the National Book Development Council of Singapore (NBDCS) to coincide with a week's visit of Ivan Southall, an Australian children's writer, at its invitation from 8–15 October, 1971" (Anuar, 1972, p. 3). In the opening speech, the late principal of the Teachers' Training College, Dr Ruth Wong stressed the role of books for children:

> … if the individual himself has rich experience, he can through print 'feel' in his being as he reads, and be just as depth conscious as through the more instantly tactile medium of TV. Furthermore, where [electronic] media make for uniformity, print still enables the individual to withdraw into his private sanctum where he can meet himself. (Wong, 1972, p. 5)



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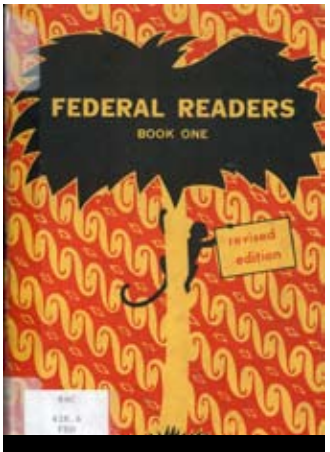

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In other words, books can provide a glimpse of imagination experienced by avid readers if they immerse themselves into that fictive world.

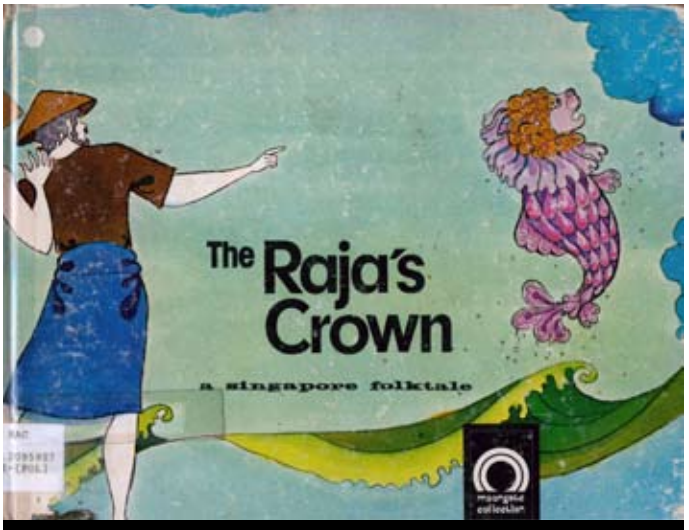
Folktales, fables and basal readers dominated SCLE in the 1970s. Didacticism from the previous period was also carried over into this period. According to Nair et al. (1977), a survey study done by the National Library covering three age groups showed their reading preference in the following order of appreciation (p. 11):

8–10 years:	(1) Adventure/Myths
	(2) Animals
11–12 years:	(1) Adventure
	(2) Myths and legends
	(3) Animal stories
	(4) Classics/School stories
	(5) Family stories
	(6) Historical fiction/Westerns
12+ years:	(1) Adventure
	(2) Myths/School stories
	(3) Animals
	(4) Classics
	(5) Historical fiction/Westerns

The adventure story was the hot favourite for all three age groups during that time, followed by myths and legends. According to Nair,

> Adventure stories are favoured way and away from myths and legends, in the above 12 age group but [the latter] share the first place with adventure where younger readers of the 8–10 age group are concerned. What is surprising is the prominence given to the classics by the older children, being fourth favoured by both groups. School stories are second favourite for the older children but are not important to the youngest readers and are only as important as the classics to readers in the 11–12 group. Family stories and western and historical fiction are not well favoured, though animal stories do appeal to all three groups, but especially the youngest readers. (Nair et al., 1977, p. 11)

In the 1970s, children's books tended to adopt the themes of national campaigns; some of these included the ban on firecrackers during the Lunar New Year, keep Singapore clean, bilingualism in schools, multiracial and multicultural identity and so on (Lim, 2009). Hence, it is not surprising to find many basal readers such as the *Active Reader* series (Federal Publications, 1970) and *New Way Readers* series (Pan Pacific, 1978) propagating these national agendas. Examples of such books include *Ah Lee the Road Sweeper* (1979), *The Singapore Youth Festival* (1975), and *Courtesy is John's Way of Life* (1979). There are other books devoted to the interests and culture of Singapore as an independent

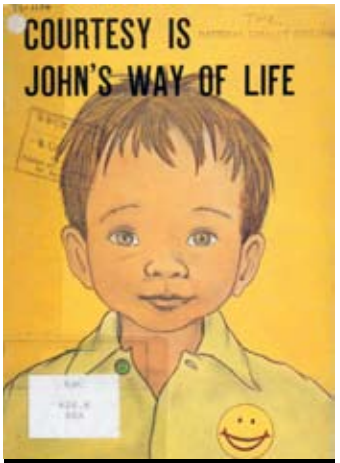


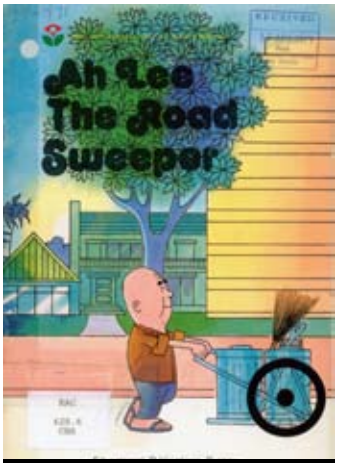
nation that date back to Sri Vijayan times in the early 14th century, such as Chia Hearn Chek's *The Redhill* (1974) and *The Raja's Crown* (1975).

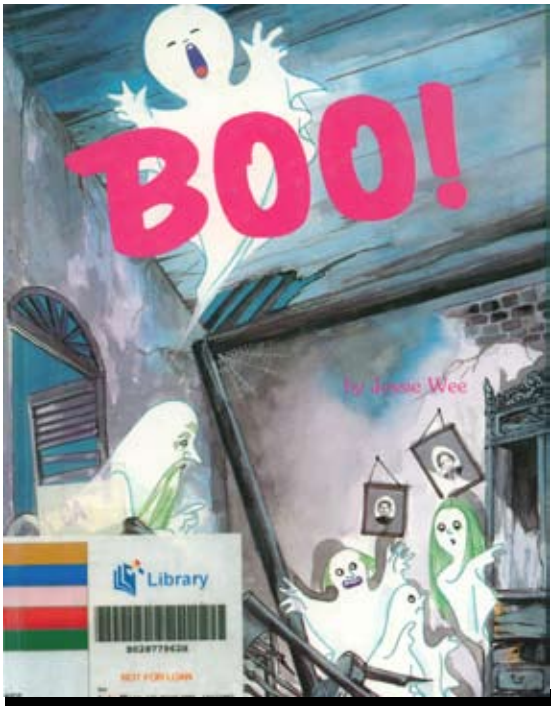
One reason why SCLE during this period lacked imaginativity was also partly due to children's reading abilities and power of imagination. Mature or sophisticated readers were few. Literary genres such as fantasy, suspense and science fiction (FSSF for short) that appeal to creative imagination, curiosity or wonder had limited appeal to our young readers then (Nair et al., 1977). From the reading survey done by the Children's Services of the National Library in 1976, the youngest group of readers in Singapore did not read books in the FSSF category at all while the other two groups showed the following preferences (Nair et al., 1977, p. 11):

11–12 years:	(1) Science fiction
	(2) Suspense
	(3) Fantasy
12+ years:	(1) Science fiction
	(2) Suspense

It should be noted that titles in the science fiction category were of limited availability compared to adventure stories and myths and legends (in the ratio of 9:99). Nair et al. (1977) explained why







FSSF had such poor appeal:

> … both science fiction and sometimes fantasy demands of the reader a certain amount of sophisticated knowledge of science and the jargon of space science, and this may be lacking in most areas where there is no tradition of Western type education, in children of these ages. (p. 13)

Another important contributing factor during the 1970s was that not all children were attending English-medium schools. This might explain why Singapore writers rarely ventured into fantasy, suspense and science fiction, and the publishers were not keen to publish books of this category.

During the 1970s, important changes had been made to the primary school curriculum. The emphasis in the English syllabus was on language enrichment through storytelling, poetry, creative writing and educational drama. The new enrichment programme created excellent opportunities for the publishing of children's literature in Singapore (Girvin, 1976).

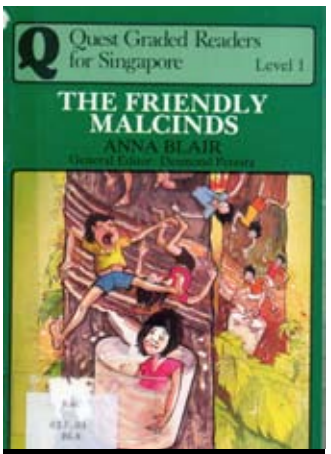
At a seminar on the role of educational materials in Singapore schools, held in 1973, the late Marie Bong, principal of Katong Convent, emphasised the urgent need for a variety of interesting books that would appeal to children so as to expose them "to the rich resources of language and stimulate them to read and write stories of their own" (as cited in Girvin, 1976, p. 6). This exposure was seen as vital and schools began to break away from the rigid textbook course of study, but success of the system, as Girvin (1976) argued, "will depend on there being sufficient supply of general literature for children to meet the demands at each level of the child's understanding. Publishers must answer these needs." (pp. 6–7)

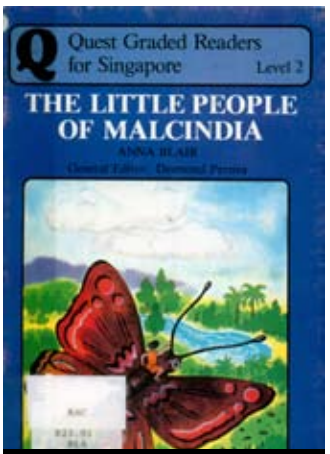
The Emergent Period (1980s)

Strictly speaking, SCLE only emerged in the 1980s, as evidenced by two national reading surveys, one conducted in 1980 and the other in 1988. The survey findings showed an increase in readership over that period as well as changing reading habits and tastes. However, few were reading books written by Singapore writers and many simply responded with "don't know" to the questions asked about local writers and their writings (National Book Development Council of Singapore, 1981). The *Report of the Committee on Literacy Arts* (Ministry of Community Development, 1988) pointed out that Singaporeans tended to have a utilitarian attitude towards reading. They read to increase general knowledge and to keep abreast of current affairs as well as to pass tests and examinations, not for pleasure.

Despite the publication of books in the genre of imaginative children's fiction such as *The Friendly Malcinds* (Blair, 1982) and *The Little People of Malcindia* (Blair, 1985), these works often read as forced and artificial in their attempts "to create a Singaporean multi-ethnic identity by incorporating qualities from each of the three main races in Singapore" (Khoo, 1990/91, p. 21). They were still lacking the kind of real imagination (also known as imagining or fantasising), which J. S. Mill (as cited in Leavis, 1950), describes as that which enables us to voluntarily conceive the absent as if it were present, the imaginary as if it were real, and to clothe it in the feelings which, if it were indeed real, it would bring along with it. "This is the power by which one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another" (Chia, 1991, p. 22) in somewhat a similar fashion like the main protagonist, Jake Scully, who entered into the body of an avatar in order to be in close contact with the Na'vi tribe, shown in the recent Oscar award-winning blockbuster movie *Avatar* and described in James Cameron's book entitled *Avatar: The Na'vi Quest* (2009).

However, books published in the 1980s showed marked improvements in visual presentation. Publishers explored the use of quality colours and illustrations for children's books, such as Jessie Wee's *Boo!* (1984), which has an attractive cover illustration. Jessie Wee, undeniably a forerunner in writing for children in Singapore, is a significant contributor to SCLE. Her series, *The Adventures of Mooty* (1980,) has been popular from





the time it was released and set a milestone in creative Singapore children's literature. Jessie Wee's focused attempt to write children's stories in the context of Singapore is characteristic of her inimitable writing style.

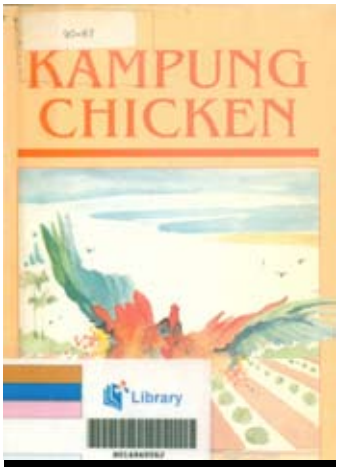
During this period, publishers would generally publish according to perceived market demand, such as catering "to the buying preference of parents for 'useful' reading by producing (1) folktales because these help children to learn about their culture, (2) stories with a moral so that children learn good values, and (3) supplementary readers with comprehension exercises so that children can improve their reading skills" (Khoo, 1990/91, p. 20).

The Progressive Period (1990s)

Although still very much in its infancy, the 1990s witnessed a relative boom in locally authored SCLE. According to Wee (1990/91), "it is the passionate belief that our children in Singapore need stories they can identify with, stories they can call their own" (p. 38). This is the driving force for many of the Singapore writers of children's fiction. SCLE took on a contemporary edge with an increasing public interest and acceptance, and publishing output improved as more writers entered the scene in the 1990s.

At the beginning of the 1990s there was a seminar, *In Search of a Singapore Children's Literature*, September 6–7, 1990, organised by the National Book Development Council of Singapore (NBDCS) to create "public awareness of the need for good children's books" (Anuar, 1990/91, p. 1). Anuar (1990/91) argued for the need to take writing for children as seriously as writing for adults, adding that "… children are part of the human race, not a separate species. And children's literature is or should be part of a country's literature" (Anuar, 1990/91, p. 1).

A new crop of writers and publications appeared on the literary scene during this period, such as Ravi Veloo with *Kampung Chicken* (1990), Noel Chia with *Iron Pa Pa* (1993) and Ramanathan Chandran with *I Have Touched the Moon!* (1997). It is also during this period that Singapore witnessed a boom in publications of SCLE. Singh (1993/94) reported that "[t]he situation … seems remarkably different in terms of the quantitative progress our fiction has witnessed in the passing years. Almost every bookshop, even the mama stalls which usually stock only magazines, carries [sic] Singapore titles" (p. 21). There were also a number of new authors who paid out of their own pockets to publish their books rather than go through a publisher. However, the quality of these children's fiction books (e.g., editing and illustrations) was poor and mostly in the genre of ghost and horror stories.



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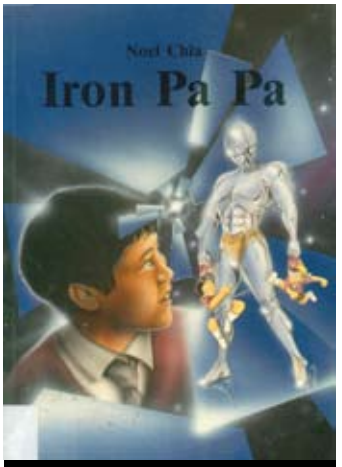

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In 1993, a reading survey conducted by the National Library found that "the percentage of literate persons who had read just one book in the last 12 months had decreased by 7% from 57% down to 50% over the last 13 years" (Butterworth, 1994, p. 5). Despite a drop in library membership, Koh (1994) reported that the fostering of the reading habit among children was being given a higher priority and had achieved some success. Figures from the National Library showed that loans of children's books increased from 1.63 million in 1980 to 4.79 million in 1993, and "the expansion of the scheme to set up neighbourhood children's libraries in the void decks of HDB flats … will give greater access to quality collections" (Koh, 1994, p. 4).

In other words, Singapore writers had to work even harder, tapping into their inspiration, imagination and creativity to produce higher, if not superb, quality children's books like that of Michael Ende's *Die Unendliche Geschichte* [Translated from German: *The Neverending Story*] (1979) and Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2008) series. Good SCLE should be able to enchant young readers into wanting more of such books; establishing quality SCLE begins the creation of the sense of one's own literary landscape in our children (Lee, 1990/91).

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This is also echoed by Singh (1993/94), who argued that "the years of following [from 1993 onwards] should see an increase in the output of 'popular' fiction; e.g., ghost stories, sensational stories of one description or another" (p. 21). He cautioned:

> … should the trend carry on for more than four or five years then we would have to rethink seriously the direction our writers were

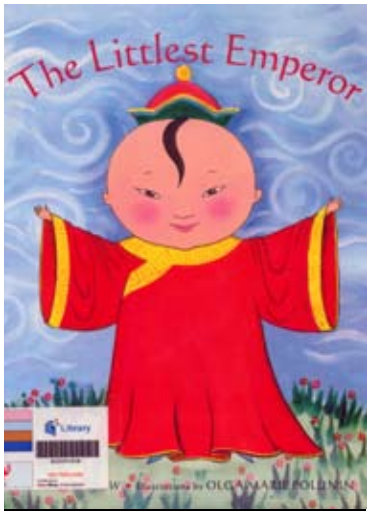
taking. In reading some of the recent fiction published I am not assured that the direction we are taking is altogether wholesome or qualitatively better. There are areas in which it would behove us to be critical if our literature is going to make the kind of international impact it deserves to make. (Singh, 1993/94, p. 21)

The New Millennium (2000s)

Since the beginning of the 21st century, SCLE has taken a more international perspective as more discerning and creative writers and illustrators enter the writing and publishing industry. The biennial Singapore Writers Festival, a major literary event in Singapore since the turn of the 21st century, has gained prominence in both domestic and regional literary landscapes. The writers' festival is now be restructured into an annual affair, attracting not only local published and aspiring writers of children's fiction as well as adult fiction but also writers from overseas.

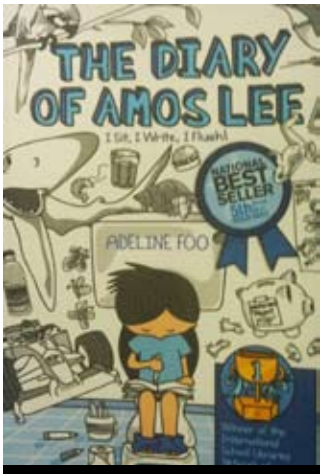
According to Ng (2010a), "judging by sales, children's books are a lucrative field and more Singapore writers are making their mark in it" (p. 6). Today, children's storybooks are selling better than Singapore adult novels. For instance, James Lee's *Mr Midnight* series of illustrated horror stories has sold more than two million copies in Asia alone, and is now on its 67th book. Other children's storybook successes, although on a smaller scale, are by writers such as Adeline Foo, whose book *Diary of Amos Lee* (2007) is not included in this study, but has sold about forty thousand copies here.

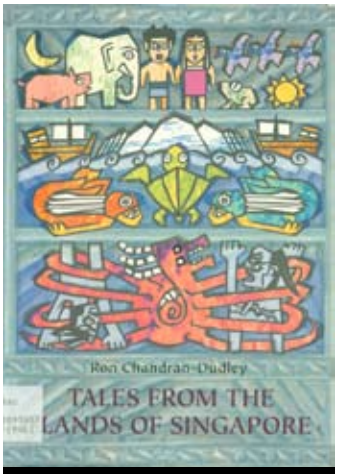
One reason for the success of local children's literature is that parents today are more willing to spend on their children's education and "the young ones are also more willing to give new and unknown writers a chance" (Ng, 2010a, p. 6). Besides, parents have also found an increased attraction to the Asian context of Singapore writers' stories. Another reason is that first-time writers of children's fiction can now seek financial assistance through the First Time Writers and Illustrators Publishing Initiative. Launched in 2005, this initiative is jointly organised by the Media Development Authority and the National Book Development Council of Singapore (NBDCS) (Media Development Authority, 2005). SCLE is still evolving slowly and gradually in terms of its quality and reader ownership. To quote Jessie Wee (1990/91), "children in Singapore need stories they can identify with, stories they can call their own" (p. 39).



Conclusion

Most books published in the 1960s were not trade books but basal readers whose aim was to improve the English proficiency of Singaporeans in both spoken and written forms.





Hence, during the Pioneering Period (1970–79), it was an uphill task for writers of SCLE to be recognised, their creative works taken seriously by the publishers and appreciated by readers at large. SCLE only really emerged in the 1980s (Khoo, 1990/91) when more writers began to write for children. Although many of these books were badly written or poorly edited, it was a good sign that teachers and parents were beginning to take notice of locally published books for children. One big challenge during that period was that many teachers were reluctant to encourage their students to read local children's literature because of its poor quality of written English. In fact, this problem persisted into the 1990s.

Between the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the Singapore book market witnessed a sudden increase in the number of new books published locally by new publishers such as VJ Times and Flame of the Forest. With more new writers trying their hand at writing for children, the local book scene saw a wider range of both new children's fiction and non-fiction titles. It was also during the period 1990–99 that more new writers had their works printed through established publishers such as Educational Publications Bureau (EPB) and Times Book International, although there were also a few others who chose to self-publish.

As we enter the new millennium (i.e., 2000s), better and more interesting books are published locally, such as Linda Gan's *A Treasury of Asian Folktales* (2000), Chandran Dudley's *Tales from the Islands of Singapore* (2001) and David Seow's *The Little Emperor* (2004). However, a new challenge has emerged — there are now more distractions (e.g. online and video gaming, and movies on video) than before. Claire Chiang, chairperson of the Asian Festival of Children's Content Advisory Board, highlighted a very real and challenging issue we are facing today: "Reading habits have decreased because of new social media platforms. We need relevant and interesting books to recapture the imagination of our children" (as cited in Ng, 2010b, p. C6). ■

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ENDNOTES

1 Literary processing channels, also known as *fantasising* (see Chia, 1991, 1996a), are unlike the literacy processing channels, which involve reading and writing processes.

2 See http://www.answers.com/topic/imagination

3 See http://www.answers.com/topic/verisimilitude

4 The term *imaginativity* is coined here to denote the ability to reproduce mental images as a result of apprehending the textual and/or non-textual experiences by means of the senses or of the mind, or to recombine previous experiences in producing new images directed at a specific goal or aiding in solving a problem

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Call Number: RSING 428.6 VEL

15 Wee, J. (1980). The Adventures of Mooty the Mouse Series. Singapore: Federal Publications.
Call Number: RSING 428.6 WEE
Mooty and grandma.
Mooty and the satay-man.
Mooty falls in love.
Mooty goes to school.
Mooty has a son.
Mooty moves out.
Mooty plays hide-and-seek.
Mooty saves a life.
Mooty the space-mouse.

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