

An Interview with Malaysian writer Malachi Edwin Vethamani

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Malachi Edwin Vethamani

An interview with the award-winning author and academic, Malachi Edwin Vethamani. The Malaysian Publishers Association awarded his poetry anthology *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems*, the National Book Award 2020 in the English Language category; two of his other works, a collection of short stories, *Complicated Lives* and an edited anthology, *Malaysian Millennial Voices* were both nominated for the National Book Award 2022 in the English Language category. Professor Ismail S. Talib, in 'The Journal of Commonwealth Literature' (2023), has rightly said that "the most prominent figure in Malaysian poetry was

Malachi Edwin Vethamani, who is, without doubt, one of the leading English-language poets in Malaysia". I thoroughly enjoyed his latest collection of short stories *Have I got something to tell you* (2024), published by Penguin Random House, which is already making waves in Malaysia and the region.

Anitha Devi Pillai: Hi Edwin, thanks so much for taking the time to do this interview with me. Congratulations on your publication of *Have I Got Something To Tell You*. It had me enthralled and I finished the book in one sitting. There was something raw and personal about the stories, and I guess I was able to connect with many of the themes that you explored in the book. Now tell me, what inspired you to compile *Have I Got Something To Tell You*.

Malachi Edwin Vethamani: Inspired is a word I don't often use about my writing. There were often certain things that act as triggers, and they provide the seeds for my stories to grow from.

ADP: Usually short story collections are named after one of the stories. I noticed that this isn't. Can you tell us more about the title of this collection of short stories?

MEV: Yes, that's often the case. This is not the first time I have done this. My first two collections of poems like this collection of short stories do not have a title of a work as the title of collection. In this case, as I was telling stories, I decided to use an expression that I often use when I have something interesting to say or share.

ADP: You have been writing for several years and are an author of an admirable number of poetry books and short stories. Can you describe your writing process when crafting short stories? How does it differ from your writing process when you write poems?

MEV: My writing process for writing stories tends to be more elaborate than when I write my poems. When I write stories, I often write down notes on characters, how certain characters may be linked and the issues that might emerge when they interact or have conflicts. I'm purposely being tentative because as I write, the plot line often changes. I pay attention to timelines and I make sure there are no discrepancies, especially when there are time-shifts in the stories.

However, when I write my poems I rarely write notes. Often the poem is brewing in my head and the lines have begun to form. Certain images emerge and as I write my several drafts, I begin to look at various literary elements in the poem. I continue to rework the lines and stanzas till I'm satisfied with what I have written.

ADP: How did you select the stories for this collection of short stories? What criteria did you use?

MEV: There weren't any set criteria for the selection of these stories. I wanted a volume of all my stories that I had written from 1995 to 2023 to be in the collection. Some of the stories had been published in various publications and with this edition, I wanted to have a wide international reader for all my stories.

Organizing the sequence of the stories for this collection was a main concern. My stories have several themes and the tone and mood in the stories are varied. So, the arrangement I chose was one way in which a reader might choose to read from cover to cover.

ADP: Did you encounter any challenges or surprises during the writing process?

MEV: Challenges, not really. Surprises there were! This was largely in the way my characters found lives of their own. I quite enjoyed it and liked the way the story developed and many of the early premises I changed and I felt it was for the better.

ADP: How do you believe your personal experiences and background influenced the stories included in this collection?

MEV: I wanted to tell stories I had not read before. I also wanted to tell stories of the Indian community within the broader multicultural Malaysian community. Malaysian Indian voices don't often get written about, especially the modern urban and contemporary Malaysian Indian voices. So my stories address issues and events within the patriarchal Indian community and also the intersection with the different ethnic and cultural communities.

ADP: Now for the question that has us all curious. Tell us, how much of is fiction or 'faction'? Because I feel like I have stepped into the 'world of MEV'.

MEV: There is a good mix of both. Most of my stories often have an element of a real instance which sets off a story. Or a combination of real people who contribute to one character. I do draw from my environment and then my imagination takes over.

ADP: Did you have a specific audience in mind while compiling this collection? If so, who are they? Did you try to tailor the collection to resonate with them?

MEV: First, I want to write for my community. By this I mean, Malaysians. I want my stories to ring true to them first. So the stories, especially the characters, must appear real to my readers. I'm very concerned with the way my characters speak. I advocate for what playwright Huzir Sulaiman said about using Manglish in

their speech, when necessary. I want my work to be recognized as written in Malaysian English incorporating both the standard and non-standard (Manglish) varieties.

Having said that, I want my stories to resonate with an international English language reading community, both from the Indian diaspora and beyond, and for those readers to know that it is from Malaysia.

ADP: Can you discuss any specific literary or cultural influences that shaped your approach to storytelling in this collection?

MEV: This is a tough question. Clearly my lifelong engagement with literature since a very early age has influenced my writing. I started as a reader, then a student and later an academic and a critic. Initially, exposed to Western literary traditions, first the British, then American, and then Russian, French, and German. The last to arrive were the New Literatures in English. So, I read African, Indian, Australian, Canadian, Singaporean, Malaysian and Filipino writers very much later.

All these traditions have contributed to my writing. It's hard to pinpoint which writer or tradition has influenced my art of storytelling as a whole. But I will acknowledge that Hemingway is my guru for writing dialogue, and Virginia Woolf I look to for thought presentation.

ADP: Which is your favorite story? Or character?

MEV: My favorite story and characters change over the decades of my story telling. My current favorite characters are Dhakshana in 'The Gift of Silence' and Rohan in 'Lee, Meg and Rohan'. My favorite stories are 'The Best Man's Kiss' and 'The Gift of Silence'.

ADP: What do you hope readers will take away from reading this anthology?

MEV: That all forms of love matter. If you believe in love and that love transcends everything, you will want to get a copy of 'Have I Got Something To Tell You'.

ADP: What do you think is the role of short story anthologies in the literary landscape, particularly in today's digital age?

MEV: Not sure how to address this question. Short stories have generally been associated with popular culture. They are often fast reads and have high entertainment value. So they fit quite nicely in the digital age of fast reads. Sadly, this has had negative implications on it as a literary genre. It is given less literary value than it deserves. Besides the genre-based short stories, there is serious (still entertaining) literary short

fiction that deserves scholarship.

As with other genres, I believe short stories contribute to our understanding of ourselves and the human condition. You can't ask more than that of a genre.

ADP: Are there any authors or works that inspired you while working on this collection? If so, how did it influence your writing?

MEV: I have several favorite authors whose work may have influenced how I write. They include Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, O. Henry, Saki and R. K. Narayan. The Malaysian short story writers I enjoy reading are Lee Kok Liang, K.S. Maniam, Sreedhevi Iyer and Shih-Li Kow.

ADP: In what ways do you think the short story format allows for unique storytelling opportunities compared to longer forms of fiction?

MEV: Unlike the longer forms of fictions, the short story often captures a moment, an incident, a certain trait in a character that allows for examination under a magnifying glass.

ADP: Are there any recurring motifs, symbols, or narrative techniques that readers might encounter throughout this collection?

There are certainly symbols and motifs that recur in the twenty stories in this collection. It is my hope that the readers will recognize them and understand what I am doing with them.

ADP: What advice would you offer to aspiring writers who are interested in writing their own collection of short stories?

MEV: Read a lot! Read, read, read. Then you can begin your journey as a writer. Find your own voice, there is no need to emulate any of the writers you have read.