Beth Yahp

"I'm a hyphenated writer": An Interview with Beth Yahp

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Beth Yahp is an award-winning author of fiction and creative non-fiction. Born and raised in Malaysia, Beth is of Chinese-Thai-Eurasian ancestry and has lived in Sydney, Kuala Lumpur and Paris. Her first novel, *The Crocodile Fury*, was published in 1992 to widespread acclaim. It won the Victorian Premier's Prize for First Fiction and the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission Award in Australia, and was translated into several languages. Her short story "In 1969", set in Kuala Lumpur during the riots of May 13, was adapted for the stage and into a musical in Malaysia.

Beth is one who experiments in multiple forms of creative writing. Her libretto, "Moon Spirit Feasting", for composer Liza Lim, won the APRA Award for Best Classical Composition in 2003. She also presented "Elsewhere", a radio programme for travellers on ABC Radio National (2010-2011) and founded the popular Memoir Club at the Randwick Literary Institute in Sydney. She completed her Doctorate of Creative Arts in travel and memoir writing at the University of Technology, Sydney, and has taught creative writing for many years. She currently lectures in the Creative Writing programme at the University of Sydney.

Her recent works include a hybrid memoir, *Eat First, Talk Later*, which was reworked from her doctoral thesis and published by Penguin Random House in 2015, and a short-story collection, *The Red Pearl and Other Stories*, published by Vagabond Press in 2017.

This interview was conducted over email in May and June 2020. Among other matters, Beth discusses her early experience as a writer, the inspiration behind her creative works, language politics in Malaysia, and her sense of belonging as a writer.

Show Ying Xin: Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Beth. Perhaps, we could start with your background? What kind of upbringing did you have as a writer?

Beth Yahp: I was encouraged to read a lot as a child – I loved books and always got them as presents. A treat was to go browse in the bookshop at Jaya Supermarket, while my mum did the shopping. I'm not sure if I had an upbringing as a writer – there was no concept of this even being a possibility in my family, and there were no local role models that I knew of in school, until in my late teens I came across the wonderful K. S. Maniam's stories and Kee Thuan Chye's plays. I didn't study literature in school, so I pretty much had a free-range upbringing as a reader. At home, I grazed my way through a small bookcase of eclectic books that my mother inherited from her family when they emigrated or my father picked up travelling the country as a salesman. From the children's Golden Pathway series – retellings of Greek myths or Great Battles, with lovely coloured plate illustrations – to James Bond and Mike Hammer via Georgette Heyer and Monica Dickens.

When did you first begin writing fiction? Could you describe some of your formative experiences?

I started writing stories in primary school – I used to write stories on pieces of paper, illustrate them (I was really good at drawing coconut trees) and sell them to classmates for a few cents each. I remember getting into trouble for this – my mum querying why I always had spare pocket money! I also remember entertaining myself by working storylines into the English grammar exercises we had to do in class. I loved reading Grimms' fairy tales and listening to stories that my Thai grandmother told about the naughty trickster character Sri Thanonchai. A strong childhood memory is of the pleasure of being enchanted by magical, made-up worlds – and I wanted to be a part of replicating that pleasure, for myself and others. By the time I went to university I had known for several years that I wanted to be a writer and studying Communications at the University of Technology, Sydney provided me with the opportunity to act on the wish – I started meeting actual writers who were our teachers and encouraged

us to hone and complete our stories and send them out for publication. I started getting published in this way. As students, we edited an anthology of our own work and read in pubs such as the Harold Park Hotel where we had to compete with pool-players and noisy crowds (who might throw things at us). There might also be an editor or publisher in the crowd, who asked you to contact them. It was an important apprenticeship – it made the possibility of a writing life real and attainable.

Your acclaimed novel, *The Crocodile Fury*, was published in 1992 in Australia. It is set in an unknown jungle-covered hill, so rich with local myths, magic, ghosts, history and a profound metamorphosis. What inspired you to write the story of the beast, the crocodile, and how did the story take shape?

The inspirations came from several sources. In KL I'd studied at Convent Bukit Nanas, which faced a jungle reserve – so even though I lived in a city, I saw the jungle with its birds, monkeys and small animals almost every school day, for 12 years. I also spent many evenings on my own there, waiting for my dad to pick me up, so I have strong memories of wandering the corridors of this slightly spooky colonial building. Like most Malaysians I also grew up with a plethora of ghost stories and myths – Chinese, Malay, Christian.... I'd also had some otherworldly experiences – for example, I experienced an apparition of the woman who became the lover in the novel – whether I was asleep and dreamt her is something I've never been certain of. If it was a dream, it was one of those dreams within a dream, where you wake up and the image/experience continues. She manifested underwater, which is probably why she became a sea creature in the novel. The crocodile comes from the idea of *buaya darat* – a virile "playboy" figure, to be feared by girls and women, which I turned into an anti-colonial revolutionary figure. The novel started as a short story, for a collection I was writing for HarperCollins which grew longer and longer. I'd sent it out as a story to a few literary journals, but never managed to place it. There was something unfinished about it. Years later, after the novel was published, I found the first typed draft of the story and realized that it contained the opening and closing paragraphs, as well as many of the key characters.

Since the publication of *The Crocodile Fury*, instead of focusing on writing a second novel, it seems that you have embarked on an interesting journey relatively different from that of other writers. Can you tell us how these experiences have shaped you as a writer and influenced your creative practice?

Ah, the terror of the second novel. I think I felt I'd put so much into the first novel, which took so many years to complete that it exhausted me… and I wanted and needed to work on different forms. I'd also spent most of my

20s being a student or sitting in a room somewhere writing – and felt it was time to experience the world a bit more. I also needed to earn a living and was lucky enough to collaborate with others or be invited to work on different projects for the stage, or work with young writers on community projects, or get grants to research different subjects, for example the *encantada* or elementals in the Philippines. That experience was too strange for me to write about and I've never managed to. I'd also been introduced to and fallen in love with western opera in my early 20s, with Wagner specifically, who taught me much about structure, and so when the composer Liza Lim invited me to work with her on the libretto for a new opera commissioned by the Adelaide Festival in 2000, I jumped at the chance. I also worked at ABC Radio National for a short time as a presenter and while there co-produced a radio documentary on One Malaysia – that was a steep learning curve. I think working on these different forms in different media, as well as teaching and mentoring younger or newer writers, are all part of the same creative practice. I saw part of my task as a creative writer, from very early on, as to try to give equal attention to whatever I'm doing – whether it's writing, teaching, editing, or wandering the streets of Manila or Paris, or cooking or eating – so writing and publishing new works are part of this larger process, and often not the main part.

The second book you authored, an atypical memoir in some respects, *Eat First, Talk Later*, was published in 2015. Why did you choose this genre? Had anyone commented that you were too young to write a memoir?

I'll answer your second question first – yes, they have – though I've always thought it a strange question. I've heard some teachers scoff at high school students who express a wish to write their memoirs, because they haven't lived enough or become wise enough or important enough to record their lives. But I think the genre invites a writer, no matter their age, to try to make sense, on some fundamental level, not just of experiences and what happened historically but also of the very act of story-making out of those experiences, that history. Who has the power to tell a story, who gets heard, whose becomes the "official" version etc. After eschewing non-fiction quite strenuously to start with (because of the, to me, fictional quality of so much that we consider to be real or true– history, news, even family stories – I guess I became interested in focusing on the material that was in front of me and through this explore what was hidden/ hidden in plain sight). I was interested in how one family story, the love story of my parents, for example, could be used to tell the story of the major historical events of the twentieth century in Malaysia, as well as connect to an older and more wide-ranging cultural history; and against this I was

also interested in tracking a particular and then little-known and suppressed part of Malaysia's contemporary history, that of *Reformasi* activists in the lead up to the 2008 elections.

Apart from being a memoir about food, family and travel, *Eat First, Talk Later* also presents a heavy layering of political and historical details about Malaysia. What kind of audience did you have in mind when writing those parts?

It's a hybrid book: about my family, but also more broadly about Malaysian history, politics and culture. It's also a book about historiography, about the problematic of the writing and structuring of life stories that unfold in unstructured, digressive and non-narrative ways – I've had comments that there's not enough personal revelation for those who love that aspect of memoir, there are too many digressions into history or films, music or food (which some readers skipped over). Sometimes I've described that book as a history disguised as memoir, and sometimes as a fictional memoir, in which I had to imagine what was secret, hidden and never spoken, or unspeakable. I guess at the time of writing, the audience was me – the part of me that was trying to make sense of my family and country, of being 'Chinese' in Malaysia, and of being on the edges of the Reformasi movement – as well as to bring to life all the ordinary, unimportant and overlooked moments that also were an intrinsic part of this family and this country. The original work was a Doctor of Arts thesis – so I guess I was writing it for three expert markers! When I reworked the thesis for Random House Australia, I worked intensively with an editor, and we worried somewhat about the sense that an Australian audience would be able to make of this story and this world. On the other hand, I always had a Malaysian audience in mind – I'm interested in what people who know exactly what I'm talking about think about this work. However – to date, that I know of, it has never been reviewed in Malaysia.

In his Afterword to your collection, *The Red Pearl and Other Stories* (2017), Nicholas Jose notices a "sharp feminist critique" in "Point of No Return", a poignant short story in which you interweave newspaper clippings with the narrative. Were there any particular real events that moved you to write this piece?

Those newspaper and "Tanya Doktor" ("Ask the Doctor") articles and columns, that make you both dumbfounded and sick to the stomach, if you're a woman! The way women are spoken about and treated in Malaysia – and Australia – is still a cause of outrage and distress to me. That's one reason for writing the story.

Do you consider yourself an activist?

That's an easy one to answer on some level – no, because so much of what I do on a day to day basis draws me away from being 'active' as a form of resistance. I say this because I know people who have shaped their lives as activists, struggling for particular causes, while I have always stayed on the edges of whatever struggle it was, contributing from the edges, but more focused on documenting and making sense of things rather than pushing a particular stance or moving it forward. I do however think that storytelling is political and one can be active through narrative, through opening up spaces for counter-narratives and nuance, rather than slogans. This has got me into trouble. Come the revolution, an activist friend once said to me, you'll be one of the first we hang. Of course he denies it now, while it remains very clear in my memory – we were student activists at that time, in our early 20s, in Sydney. That we open up spaces in which we can tell such stories, as well as their counter-stories or denials, is for me a kind of activism – an opening up into conversation and debate, a defusing of the originary violence of that, or any, utterance.

You write in English. In Malaysia, there are people who lament that English-language literature is considered "sectional literature" as opposed to "national literature," while some others see English as an elitist language, if not a colonial one. What are your views on these issues?

One result of colonialism is that English now exists in the plural, and the English that Malaysians use and that I use, is one of many. In a globalized postcolonial world, English isn't monolithic but in constant transformation and hybridization. It's on the move, even in colonizing or settler colonial countries. The branding of something as 'elitist' doesn't really interest me; it's a useful, coded way of devaluing something so that the thing itself isn't discussed, for example, in Malaysia, this would be the segregation of Anglophone, Sinophone or Indian literature from inclusion in a Malaysian literary canon, which in practical terms excludes Anglophone, Sinophone and Indian language writers from national literary grants, prizes, residences, laureate positions, etc. The Englishes I use are fluid – different in Australia or Malaysia, or depending on who I'm speaking to. When I lived in France, I noticed the curious way my use of English changed the longer I lived there, how it morphed, became more flexible, contaminated, interesting. In the same way, the singularity of a 'national literature' is to me self-limiting – surely the many ways in which Malaysians tell stories, in whatever languages or dialects they best tell them, deserve to be included, valued, translated, taught and interpreted as part of the story of the Malaysian nation.

In an essay "Place Perfect and the Other Asia" (1996), you mention that you have trouble representing yourself, as there are "ongoing negotiations and contradictions that go into the making of one's self." Born in Malaysia of Chinese-Thai-Eurasian origins, having travelled to many parts of the world, and now living in Australia as an Asian immigrant, have you finally come to terms with issues of identity and belonging? Does it bother you when you are asked whether you are a Malaysian or Australian writer?

I recently read an article by Christine Yunn-Yu Sun in *The Sydney Review of Books,* in which she writes about "the space between 'Asian' and 'Australian' in 'Asian Australian' [which] divides not only two words but two worlds…". Although I've lived in Australia longer than I've lived in Malaysia now, I'm technically still a Malaysian, which adds another layer of 'space' in how I might define my identity or experience of belonging. In a sense, being a migrant, I will always carry within me a sense of belonging to two places, while simultaneously not-belonging to wherever I find myself. This core sense of instability, or "bothness", as Leah Jing McIntosh describes it, offers itself as a site to be navigated, negotiated, interrogated. It's tiring, but sometimes generative and even exhilarating, "this bothness" that McIntosh claims "makes me fuller, stronger; this bothness which sees me diminished, attacked, or flattened as a stereotype". A further complication is that I felt this way before ever leaving Malaysia: race and language politics had something to do with this; and gender politics too; a sense, before I knew the words to name it, of things not being "in place", certainly not for someone like me. As a cop-out and a short cut to all of the above, I often try to avoid the national tag to my description as a writer; or I say: I'm a hyphenated writer.

You are a mentor at creative writing workshops, and you now teach creative writing full time at the university. Do you enjoy teaching people how to write?

I enjoy working with young or new writers – it's exciting to see their ideas take shape and their writing and reading practices develop; it's also exciting to see a work develop from an idea to a finished creative piece through the research and writing process. I'm learning from my students all the time.

What can we expect from you in the near future?

I'm currently working on a couple of projects, a book about Malaysian small-p politics and small-r *reformasi*, I think. And a series of vignettes for a book of *Small Pleasures*, set in Sydney and Kuala Lumpur. That's about all I can say about these projects at the moment!

Thank you very much, Beth, for your responses to my questions.