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SPEECH BY MR WAN HUSSIN ZOOHRI, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (HEALTH AND CULTURE), AT THE PRIZE PRESENTATION CEREMONY FOR THE 1983 SHORT STORY AND PLAYWRITING COMPETITION AT THE DRAMA CENTRE ON THURSDAY, 31 MAY 1984 AT 5.30 PM

The 1983 National Short Story Writing Competition attracted a total of 238 entries in the four language streams, compared with 208 entries in the previous year. Entries for the Playwriting competition totalled 40 compared with 76 in 1982. These figures represent an increase of 14 per cent and a decrease of 47 per cent in the number of entries for short stories and playwriting respectively.

While I am denied the gratification of saying that the two competitions 'have received overwhelming response', I am not unduly perturbed. Cultural development moves in small steps in the same way that good creative writing takes time and effort to develop. Rome was not built in a day and many great writers and playwrights who have produced memorial works did not achieve instant success without sustained effort and toil. The Ministry of Culture will persevere in its efforts to promote creative writing and provide a conducive environment to enable budding and established writers to express their creativity and flair for story telling and playwriting through the competitions and the publication of their works to reach a wider audience. In this way, we hope that the craft of writing will slowly but surely improve.

For literature to develop and flourish in Singapore, local writers must take creative writing more seriously than as a mere diversion or fitful indulgence.

There must be a strong conviction that we can make the local literary scene vibrant. Some may lament that there is a dearth of suitable themes in our society. This is a fallacy and can easily be rebutted. The entries for the competitions show no lack of local themes. Indeed, how could this be when our society is constantly moving and transforming?

Singapore has 165 years of modern history, not long by the standards of countries like China, India and Indonesia. But there are more than enough dramas during this period for fictionalisation and dramatisation purposes.

The past has hardly been touched or treated by local creative writers. The few expatriate writers who did so wrote largely about their own nationals, merely throwing in local colour, with local characters on the periphery of the drama. This is understandable, for it is only local writers who can place local people on centre stage and then investigate their problems and issues. Our pioneers have left us an untouched heritage - a treasury of raw materials for our writers to draw on to create good novels and plays.

If our past is so rich in raw materials and resources for literary purposes, the present abounds with more than enough human drama and social issues to stir the imagination. There is so much happening today that the writers can readily draw upon their personal encounters and experience to narrate. Our multi-racial and rich cultural setting also provides a good backdrop for such endeavours.

While good literature need not be didactic, and in fact this can spoil what is otherwise good writing, it is necessary for the writers to relate the theme to the reading public. This can be achieved by arousing and identifying with the readers' myriad moods and emotions and making alive the main characters of their creation to excite the readers' imagination and interest.

It remains for me to thank the Singapore Cultural Foundation for its generous sponsorship of the two competitions, and the judges for helping in the adjudication of the entries. To the prize winners, I would like to offer my warmest congratulations on their success. To those who did not win any awards, do try again.

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