

Singapore Chronicles: 50 Books to Commemorate Singapore's Big 50

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What makes Singapore, Singapore? The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has arrived at a list of 50 subjects that together gives a comprehensive picture of Singapore as a whole — from milestones in its history, to aspects of the city-state's governance, economy, environment, community and culture. This kaleidoscope of topics will be featured in a series called *Singapore Chronicles*, and launched throughout next year to commemorate Singapore's 50th anniversary of Independence.



IPS Director Janadas Devan (far left and facing camera), IPS Special Research Adviser Arun Mahizhnan (fifth from left and facing camera) and several of the *Singapore Chronicles* authors addressing the media over breakfast.

Over breakfast at the Singapore Botanic Gardens on 10 June, IPS Director Janadas Devan and IPS Special Research Adviser Arun Mahizhnan spoke to the media about the conceptualisation of *Singapore Chronicles*, and the stellar cast of authors who will helm the

series. Each book in the series will serve as a primer on one subject and its author will be a domain expert in the subject. They will focus on the key aspects of the subject, providing a historical overview, analysis of some important issues and possibly a glimpse into what is to come. The series will be written in an accessible style so that it would appeal to a wide range of audience. "It [*Singapore Chronicles*] is not meant as an account for specialists. Think of it as an extended Wikipedia entry, but written by the specialists for the general public," said Mr Devan. Added Mr Arun: "It will be the guiding hand for the sometimes murky water of politics, economics and social development, and help deliver insights into what makes Singapore tick."



(From left) The authors of the *Singapore Chronicles* series who were photographed by the media during the press conference: Biologist N. Sivasothi, food writer Sylvia Tan, former permanent secretary Peter Ho, academic Chua Beng Huat and former permanent secretary Bilahari Kausikan.

Some of the authors were present at the breakfast session to speak to journalists about the books they were working on. Former Permanent Secretaries Peter Ho and Bilahari Kausikan are writing about *Governance* and *Confrontation*, respectively; food writer Sylvia Tan will produce a primer on *Food*; academic Professor Chua Beng Huat will look at *Multiracialism*; and biologist N. Sivasothi will examine the country's *Flora & Fauna*. Several IPS staff are also involved in the development and writing of the books. Mr Devan who is the overall supervisor of the project is writing about *Separation* from Malaysia. Mr Arun and Mr Asad Latif are the co-editors for *Singapore Chronicles* and they are also authors: Mr Arun is working with three other experts on the *Literature* book, while Mr Asad is writing the book on *Policing*. Senior Research Fellow Dr Yap Mui Teng and Research Fellow Christopher Gee will contribute a book on *Demography* while Senior Research Fellow Dr Gillian Koh's book will focus on *Civil Society*.

Asked about the genesis of the *Singapore Chronicles* project, Mr Arun said that both he and Mr Devan felt strongly that IPS should make a substantive intellectual contribution towards Singapore's 50th anniversary and after considering a few options, it was Mr Devan who came up with the idea of "a series of primers on anything and everything" about Singapore. As there were so many subjects about Singapore that could be covered in the series, it was decided that only 50 books would be produced for this special occasion. The next step was to shortlist the topics to be featured in the series. A wish-list was sought from IPS researchers, the *Singapore Chronicles* advisory panel led by IPS Special Adviser, Professor Tommy Koh, and academics in the field. Over 70 subjects were suggested, which the editorial team whittled down to 50. "We shortlisted the final 50 based on whether the subject was important, whether it added to the comprehensiveness of the coverage and whether we could find the right author," said Mr Arun.

Some of the topics covered by the books are the Constitution, Presidency, Separation, Housing, Transport, Demography, Politics, CPF, Sports and Food. This is a first-of-its-kind series, he emphasised, noting that there was nothing in bookstores currently that offered an expert's take on these topics for a broad audience — from A-level students to the intelligent lay person to business leaders and even foreign diplomats.

Responding to a question about the greatest challenge in putting together such a wide-ranging series, Mr Arun said he was heartened by the excitement displayed by the authors towards working on the project, especially since such a series had never been done before. It was "relatively easy" to persuade most of them to come on board, he said. "The difficulty now lies more in project coordination because we want to bring the books out in a fixed timeline throughout 2015 in specific categories. That's a big challenge for us. The second challenge is to ensure that the writing style allows us to reach out to the whole range of audience we have in mind," said Mr Arun.

What the Authors Say

Professor Chua envisages his book on *Multiracialism* will explore the subject as an element of Singapore's constitution. "Most people think it is obvious [to have multiracialism as an official policy] because we have many races, but in terms of racial composition, we are not even as complex as London or New York. So you have to think of it as a conscious policy choice and not just because we have a mix of races," he said.

Mr Ho, the former Head of the Civil Service, will be fronting a team of authors from the Civil Service College to write the book on *Governance*. This primer, as a record on how governance in Singapore has evolved, is not just important to the public at large but also to the civil servants of Singapore because they need to know the antecedents and how governance in Singapore has evolved over the years. "Achieving good governance is not a simple matter. It takes quite a lot to run a country like Singapore. Our very smallness creates its own set of challenges and complexity. And I hope people will appreciate that," he said.

The book on *Confrontation* will be written by Mr Kausikan. With his extensive experience in diplomacy, both as Singapore Ambassador at several overseas missions and as Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he will use the book to draw some larger lessons

about Singapore's general approach to foreign policy. For a nation whose total trade is more than three times its Gross Domestic Product, foreign policy will always play a very important role in Singapore. Although this is a huge and sensitive topic, he hopes to be able to boil it down to "something that is readable".

On the other end of the spectrum in the series is the topic on food. Ms Tan, a well known author of many books on food, will explore the history of Singapore food and the factors influencing it in her book. Readers can expect the book on *Food* to offer the societal history of our nation's food. "A lot of younger generations do not know the eating that we went through, the kind of places we ate at or even how we ate at these places," Ms Tan added.

A land-scarce country like Singapore always finds itself in the dilemma where very often, when land space is developed, a part of nature is inevitably lost. This is the trade-off that the nation grappled with over the past 50 years of rapid development. Mr Sivasothi, who is working on the book on *Flora and Fauna*, shared that "for those who think that it is all over, now with elaborate restoration, greener outlook that is pervading, we will be able to arrive at a co-existence. Nature has not been completely wiped out; it is at our doorstep, [albeit] struggling to stay alive."



Mr Sivasothi (right) sharing what the book *Flora and Fauna* means to him.

He said that what we see today in Singapore is a product of layers: loss, preservation and restoration of nature; and the appearance of the smooth-coated otters at Marina Bay and other parts of Singapore are a testament to that evolution. "When we look at the [otters] now we don't realise there is this whole history of policy which is deliberate. There were battles between the government and certain non-government organisations. And now there are a lot

of people working — who were maybe rather suspicious with each other in the 80s and 90s — to provide solutions together. It is very interesting; we are like a petri dish for Southeast Asia. It is a wonderful laboratory.”

Concluding the press meet, Mr Devan said: “The aim is to cover the philosophical to the prosaic, the fundamental to the expedient. These subjects represent the multiple facets of Singapore’s history, culture and living environment and how they have shaped life as we know it in Singapore.”

Further details on the series will be available toward the end of this year. For more information about the series, contact ips.publicaffairs@nus.edu.sg.

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