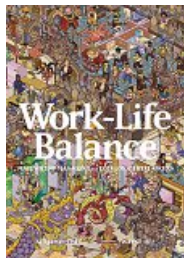


Graphic novel about MNC run by demons is Book of the Year



Work-Life Balance: Malevolent Managers And Folkloric Freelancers (top) won Book of the Year and Best Literary Work, while The Comfort Women Of Singapore In History And Memory (above) is Best Non-Fiction Title.
PHOTOS: DIFFERENCE ENGINE, NUS PRESS

Clement Yong

A genre-blending graphic novel about a multinational company run by Asian demons and an introductory volume on comfort women in Singapore were among the winners at the 2023 Singapore Book Awards, which celebrates the achievements of the home-grown publishing industry.

Work-Life Balance: Malevolent Managers And Folkloric Freelancers by Benjamin Chee and Wayne Ree, published by Difference Engine, on Wednesday won the Best Literary Work category and the coveted Book of the Year.

The breezy mash-up of prose and comics draws on Asian mythology while taking a wry look at corporate life, starring pontianak, manananggal, ba jiao gui and other supernatural beings who are at risk of being displaced from their jobs by foreign competition.

The multinational company's goal? "To acquire the power to destroy civilisation and bring the world to an end", presenting a quandary to those tempted to join its mission.

The judging panel said of the book: "Work-Life Balance is both weird and wonderful, a miracle of a book that crosses several media. (It is) truly a stimulating experience for the reader: a unique amalgam of a business book on office relationships, a post-colonial treatise in a form of a mythological clash of cultures, a graphic novel, a feminist diatribe, a wuxia homage, and much more."

The panel also called it a cultural statement, and a tome that anyone who wishes to understand the psycho-social aspects of 21st-century life in South-east Asia must read.

Best Non-Fiction Title went to **The Comfort Women Of Singapore In History And Memory** by National Institute of Education (NIE) associate professor of history Kevin Blackburn, published by the National University of Singapore Press.

In just 200 pages, it answers a long unanswered question: that there were comfort women in Singapore during World War II, including local women – making the case that though no Singaporean women have come forward, people should not think they were exempt.

By sieving through oral interviews and archival materials, Blackburn names Cairnhill, Bukit Pasoh, Seletar and Kallang as places where comfort houses were set up by the Japanese.

In these, although Korean and Japanese women predominated, there were also Javanese, Chinese, Caucasian and Singaporean women – many of whom were abducted, or were pre-war prostitutes recruited into continuing their trade under the Japanese Occupation.

The annual Singapore Book Awards is presented by the Singapore Book Publishers Association (SBPA), which represents publishers based in Singapore.

A total of 139 books were submitted by 27 publishers across nine categories, after which the Book of the Year is picked from the nine winning books.

Seven judges from various sectors of the industry were involved in the decision-making – National Library Board chief librarian Gene Tan; book editor and former SBPA president Triena Noeline Ong; former Books Kinokuniya Asia-Pacific senior store and merchandising director Kenny Chan; Pustaka Nasional publisher Syed Ali Ahmad Semait; Casco Publications business director Kathy Low; senior publisher at Taylor & Francis Katie Peace; and Dr Jo-Ann Netto-Shek, lecturer of English language and literature at NIE.

Mr Chan, who presented the award for Best Literary Work, noted that all four finalists featured a female protagonist. "I'm not trying to be woke or politically correct. These books stand out for their quality alone."

The other finalists for Best Literary Work are **The Accidental Malay** by Karina Bahrin, published by Epigram Books, with global publishing rights later sold to British publisher Picador; **Marshall Cavendish International Asia's Dearest Intimate** by literary stalwart Suchen Christine Lim; and **The House Of Little Sisters** by Eva Wong Nava, published by Penguin Random House SEA.

Straits Times Press won in the Best Cover Design category for **M/other: 20 Powerful Stories Of Parental Love Against All Odds** by Loretta Chen, and Best Picture Book for **Grandma's Tiger** by Alan John and Quek Hong Shin.

Last year's winner for Book of the Year was **The Food Of Singapore Malays**, a monumental tome on the history of Malay cuisine by Khir Johari. It went on to win the top prize at the 28th Gourmand World Cookbook Awards, also known as the Oscars of the cookbook world.

FULL LIST OF WINNERS

- **Best Non-Fiction Title:** **The Comfort Women Of Singapore In History And Memory** by Kevin Blackburn (NUS Press)
- **Best Literary Work:** **Work-Life Balance: Malevolent Managers And Folkloric Freelancers** by Benjamin Chee and Wayne Ree (Difference Engine)
- **Best Illustrated Non-Fiction Title:** **Eat Here Or Take Away: All About Singapore Hawker Culture** by various contributors (Landmark Books)
- **Best Cover Design:** **M/other: 20 Powerful Stories Of Parental Love Against All Odds** by Loretta Chen (Straits Times Press)
- **Best Young Person's Title:** **Amazing Ash & Superhero Ah Ma #2: Coming Of Age** by Melanie Lee and Arif Rafhan (Difference Engine)
- **Best Picture Book:** **Grandma's Tiger** by Alan John and Quek Hong Shin (Straits Times Press)
- **Best Custom Publishing:** **A Reverent Journey: Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka**, edited by Sharifah Zahra Aljunied and Syed Abdullah Abdul Rahman Aljunied (Opus Editorial)
- **Best Professional Title:** **The Millennial Leader: Working Across Generations In The New Normal** by Vivek Iyyani (Penguin Random House SEA)
- **Best Educational Title:** **The Intertidal Adventures Of BioGirl MJ** by Man Jing Kong and Raye Ng (World Scientific Education)
- **Book of the Year:** **Work-Life Balance: Malevolent Managers And Folkloric Freelancers** by Benjamin Chee and Wayne Ree (Difference Engine)