

LIFE&TIMES **WELL LIT.****MASLINA YUSOFF AND KEITH CHONG**

"I was in advertising for a long time," says Maslina Yusoff, 53. A graduate of Universiti Teknologi Mara (UITM) Shah Alam, she first worked in a Japanese advertising agency, but left in 2000 to start an advertising company with her husband. "Then, I got tired and wanted to do something different," she explains.

With her husband's encouragement, she decided to pursue a career in writing and illustrating. "I wanted to write stories for children, but didn't know how," she adds. "I searched online and learnt about the work of Yusof Gajah and other writers. Then when I met him at the Asian Festival of Children's Content in Singapore — in June 2013 — I told him what I wanted to do. He said something inspiring: 'Babies are born every day. Until they become teenagers, there are so many stories you can tell about them.'"

Maslina then spent one evening coming up with lots of ideas for her book. When she returned home, all these ideas were crystallised and she came up with a children's story based on her daughter, Nasyaqi Airiz Mohd Razif, 24.

"My character is called Mila. It's a name anyone from China to Europe can pronounce. Like my daughter, Mila has very curly hair and she hates it. My son, who is now 27, used to tease and call her Maggi. And when she first read the story, my daughter was like, 'Eh, is this about me?' She wasn't pleased because she thought I was making fun of her. But now she's OK."

Once the book (called *Mila's Big Curly Hair*) was published, Maslina approached Kota Buku, hoping it would act as her agent. As it happened, Kota Buku was scheduled to attend the Shanghai International Children's Book Fair in December. They asked if she could create another two books, which she did — *Mila's Big Secret* and *Mila's Big Discovery*.

Some of the other participants at the fair then advised her to protect her intellectual property. "When I returned to Malaysia," she elaborates, "I went to the trademark office and filled out all the forms. Now, that image of Mila is trademarked. Anyone who uses it without permission will be in breach of copyright rules."

The intellectual property belonging to Keith Chong Kah Hwee, 39, isn't as straightforward. Although he creates the characters in his award-winning comic series, *Lawak Kampus*, as an employee of Gempak Starz (a company specialising in creative content), the copyright in the work lies with the company.

"I'm so tired," he says the moment he joins the interview. "My wife just had twins last week. Together with my first son, we now have three boys," he laments. Wiping his brow, he has a drink of water before he tells his story. This native of Kuala Lumpur says that he knew, from age 4 that he wanted to be a cartoonist.

"Still, in the 1990s, there were no courses for cartoonists. So, I did the next best thing: Graphic designing. I worked with an advertising company but I was bored after two years. I went back to studying. When I was 24, I took a 2D animation course at Lim Kok Wing University. Then, I completed another course in Canada. When I returned, I joined my present company as an assistant comic artist."

With his boss' support and encouragement, Keith started the *Lawak Kampus* comic series. This series is now published and circulated in China, Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore apart from its quarterly print of 20,000 copies in Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin for the Malaysian market. "Every day, I have to think of something new. I have been doing this since 2003.

"Sometimes, I am like hitting my head on the wall to get an idea." Nonetheless, of the many awards

Protect what's yours

Copyright and intellectual property are important in fostering innovation, write **Kerry-Ann Augustin and Aneeta Sundararaj**

ONCE I bought a book on the Vietnam War when I was in Ho Chi Minh. I was happy to get it at a bargain, only to realise its content was photocopied from the original book. It was also badly done, with pages printed out lopsided, effectively cutting off half the paragraph and sentences.

If I were the author, I'd be unsure whether to be upset at the person for making money off a badly photocopied version of my work or for the fact that he had taken the liberty to photocopy it without my consent. Either way, who would want to produce anything at all if it could be duplicated without even acknowledging the effort that you had put into creating it.

"Intellectual property and copyright are very important for content owners in Malaysia," says Hasri Hassan, the senior manager of Kota Buku, a government agency which was created to promote literature under The National Book Policy of Malaysia.

"By having complete control,

the content owner will be able to monetise their rights further. It's not limited to the physical book as it includes the digital platforms as well," he adds.

Kota Buku will be spearheading the 6th Kuala Lumpur Trade and Copyright Centre from April 19-21. The event will see industry players and vendors from the world of publishing gathered under one roof in an effort to transform the country into a hub for copyright trade in the region.

"Malaysian publishers have taken part in various book fairs, including the biggest such as the Frankfurt Book Fair and the London Book Fair. During these fairs, Malaysian publishers have managed to sell translation rights, illustrations and licensing," adds Hasri.

Four Malaysian authors and illustrators who have successfully created their own trademarks speak to *Life & Times* on why intellectual property and copyright matters in enriching their craft and the nation's publishing industry.

Kerry-Ann Augustin



Keith Chong Kah Hwee with his award-winning comics.

and accolades he's won, he is most proud of the time his work was exhibited at the National Art Gallery in 2013.

Keith feels he's struck the perfect balance: Although the copyright in

his work doesn't vest in him, he is still recognised as the artist who creates his comic characters. With his employers' vast resources, his work can be viewed by many.

He says: "What's the point of

doing good work and protecting it so much that nobody gets to see it? Many artists are good, but they don't have the money to promote their work. In the end, no one sees it."

Aneeta Sundararaj

EMILAYUSOF

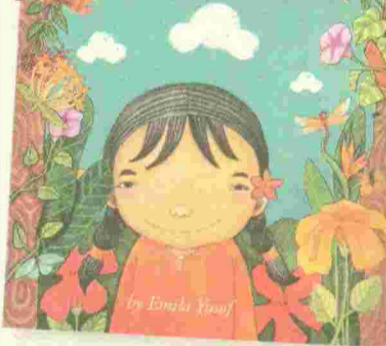
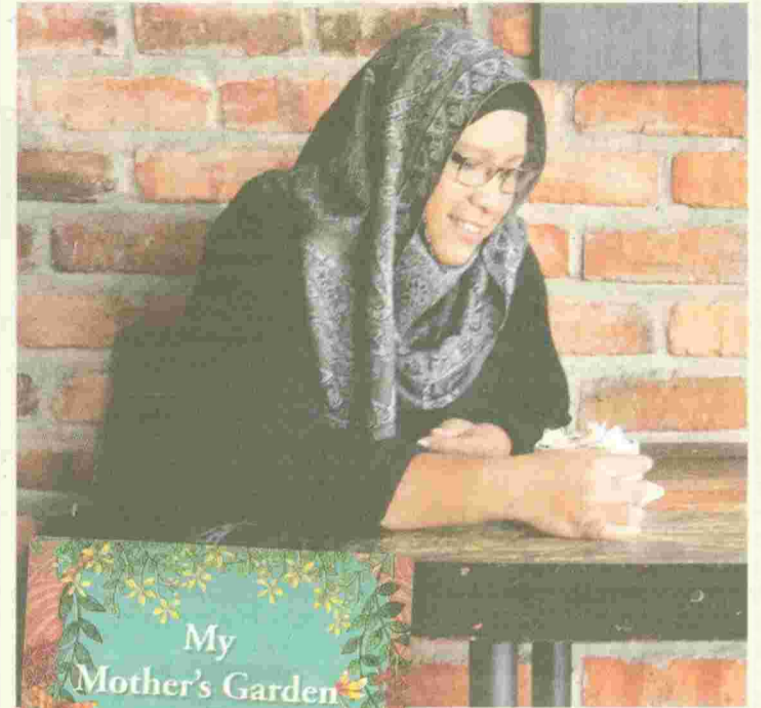
The frustrating search for a Malay nursery rhyme book ended up being one of the most unexpected life-changing decisions for author and illustrator Emila Yusof.

"Back then there were no books like that. So I created one with digital illustrations, did a mock-up and showed to a publisher," she says. "They said it was quite expensive to print a full-coloured book and that there was no demand in the market. So that was it," Emila confides, adding she felt hopeless upon hearing such feedback.

But determined to explore the idea, the Raub-born blogger and illustrator combined her expertise to create an illustrated children's book. In 2010, her first book *My Mother's Garden* was published. "Seeing the book for the first time was like holding a trophy! I never thought that I will be writing/illustration a children's book," she says, recalling seeing her dream realised in a physical form.

Most of Emila's work is about Dina, a child character whose hair is set in pleats with an equally adorable fringe to match. "The Dina Series is about a little girl who is curious about everything around her," she says, pointing out that it was a means of educating children about the names of things in their surroundings.

"Writing a book is half the job. The other half is promoting it," says Emila who has since written eight children's books. "I have been developing a fan base since 2007 where I posted personal illustration projects on my blog. When I got my books published, I just continued from there," says Emila who also decided to share her artwork on various



social media platforms. "It helps to get people to know about my books." But like every author, she has faced the ugly reality of copyright infringements. "We need to start educating future designers as well as the public — at schools, colleges and universities and even those

working in related industries about intellectual property and copyright," she says. She reveals that her illustrations were once taken and used commercially without consent. "Intellectual property is important to me as an author and illustrator because it helps generate my income." Since her venture into the genre of children's literature, Emila has been invited to showcase her work at book fairs, from Bologna to Frankfurt, Abu Dhabi to Singapore. "Having your work copyrighted or protected is important because it creates high-paying job opportunity, drives economic growth and promotes innovation," she explains.

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BENWONG

Becoming a comic artist was the last thing on Ben Wong's mind. "I've always been a science student and I studied business. 'I'm a businessman!' says the bespectacled 31-year-old with a smirk. His foray into the industry came about almost accidentally. I was looking for part-time jobs after graduating so I joined this animation studio. It just picked up from there."

Wong, who never went to art school nor took drawing seriously, started to fall in love with the craft as the years progressed. "Growing up in the 80s meant being exposed to a lot of Japanese anime," he says, adding that Slam Dunk and Dragon Ball Z were his main influences. Wong started illustrating manga style comic strips which eventually won the attention of people in the industry. "Most of the stories I depicted in comics were sci-fi, action. But comics are really not about the



technicalities of drawing or art. It's all about good storytelling," he divulges.

After a few years, Wong tried to publish his own comics. "It didn't work out," he says, recalling the failure of the magazine to pick up. "Publishing is not just about your art or work. There's a whole business aspect of things to look into," says Wong who admits that being attached to publishers has helped in pushing his work out to the world while he focuses on the creative aspect of his work instead.

Over the last decade, Wong has won various accolades, most notably the International Manga Award. Wong took home silver on both occasions. The first in 2007 and then in 2014, making him the only comic artist in history who has won the Manga Silver award twice. "Not many people know about this award or how competitive the industry actually is," he says. Wong beat over 300 contestants to do the country proud with *Atan*, based on the life of Hasbi and his best friend, a buffalo named Atan, in rural Malaysia.

Wong is, however, optimistic about the future of comics in the country "Although only 10-15 per cent of people in the country read

comics, schools are starting to utilise this aspect of storytelling to educate children." He explains that he plans to craft comics for history and moral subjects in the near future.

For Wong, who kickstarted Comixo Studio, an online portal to showcase Malaysian talent in the field, the issue of copyright and intellectual property is a sensitive one. "You have to find a balance between what you and the publisher earns. I think it all boils down to mutual understanding and respect. That said, sometimes copyright or the lack of it can have an impact on the industry."

He cites Japanese manga series *Naruto* as an example. "It would not have been as popular had it not been 'legal' in that sense."

He is quick to add that intellectual property is about protecting one's craft. "If no one gets credit for their work, what kind of incentive does that give a person to continue creating creative content? Copyright or ownership of your work is important because it allows the artist/creator to see the benefits of their efforts."

Kerry-Ann Augustin