

INSPIRING OTHERS TO WRITE
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For Penang-based American writer Robert Raymer, Saturday 20th May was double duty and a double book launch: creative writing workshop in Penang and book launch in Kuala Lumpur for *Lovers and Strangers Revisited* and *25 Malaysian Short Stories, Best of Silverfish New Writing 2001-2005*.

Robert, author of *Lovers and Strangers Revisited*, had one busy day indeed. That morning he gave a workshop for PELLTA (Penang English Language Learning and Teaching Association) on “Turning Personal Experiences into Narratives (for high marks and extra cash!)”.

Over 50 participants, students and teachers alike, attended the workshop, where Robert led them step-by-step on how to turn their personal experiences into a first-person narrative. He even helped them to come up with ten ideas!

To assist them, Robert gave the participants plenty of examples of narratives he had published in newspapers and magazines like *Going Places*, *Silver Kris*, *Her World* and *Readers' Digest*. The subjects ranged from cooking spaghetti for his mother-in-law, being fitted for a suit, and dancing the tango in the Oscar –award winning French movie *Indochine*.

Midway through the workshop, Robert read a first-person narrative about an encounter with a shadow spirit in Sarawak that he had written that very week for the workshop.

“Teaching by example,” he called it, and then he asked the participants, before he began reading, to check on him to see if he was doing what he was asking them to do – using the 5W’s and adding sensory details: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings.

He also gave several examples of narratives written by students he had taught at the Language Centre at USM, where he has been teaching creative writing since 1996. He would encourage his students, after they had submitted their assignments for assessments, to clean them up and submit them to newspapers or magazines.

He did the same for the PELLTA participants, many of whom completed a draft by the end of the two-and-a half hour workshop. At various stages, Robert would check on their progress, to keep them focused on the task at hand.

“If you want to see your work published, first you have to write it.” Sounds simple, but Robert pointed out that far too many would-be writers keep putting the writing part off and may never get around to it, unless someone like him nudges them in the right direction.

“Teachers,” students often lament to him, “even in universities, do the opposite. They scold and discourage you! Treat you like children!”

After the workshop, and before he could give his customary question-and-answer session, he was swamped for autographs for his collection of 15 short stories set in Malaysia, *Lovers and Strangers Revisited* (launched last month in Penang) and *25 Malaysian Short Stories, Best of Silverfish New Writing 2001-2005*, which also includes one of his short stories, “Waiting for My Father to Crash”.

This turned out to be a perfect tune up for the Kuala Lumpur double launch of those very same books that very afternoon.

After rushing from the workshop, Robert hopped a plane to KL and arrived at Silverfish Books moments before the double launch was to begin. He was greeted by publisher Raman Krishnan and then met with the invited guests and ten other writers from the *25 Malaysian Short Stories*.

Present were Cean, Christopher Yin, Devana Kasinathan, Joanna Van, Keith Leong, Mathew Thomas, Megat Ishak, Dato' M Shan, Shahril Morat, and Yoshua Chua. Plus Raman, who had recently published his own collection of short stories under the name TRR Raman, *The Wedgewood Ladies Football Club and other stories*.

Instead of the various writers reading excerpts of their short stories, Raman had asked Robert, “as the first 'Silverfish writer' to progress from one or two short stories to a whole book”, to inspire the other writers present to write more and to compile their short stories into a collection.

As Robert spoke, he drew on his experiences and his passions of teaching creative writing, conducting writing workshops, and editing *Silverfish New Writing 4*. He is also the author of *Lovers and Strangers* (Heinemann Asia, 1993). *Lovers and Strangers Revisited* (Silverfish, 2006) is his most recent book.

According to Raman, “Robert was in his element, with 'Robert the Creative Writing Lecturer' coming to the fore - coaxing and urging and bullying. No time? Are you married? Do you have two children crawling all over your back when you sit down to write? No time is only an excuse.”

“You have to set aside your ego,” he also urged, “and let others look at your work and offer constructive feedback – even if you have to hire an editor.” This was what Robert did when he decided to rewrite his collection of short stories – after he had published 14 of the 15 stories 54 times in nine countries!

“And network with other writers, too,” he said. “The days of working in isolation are long gone.” He gave an example of a writer from Australia who recently contacted him

about publishing her novel about East Timor in this region. Then Robert contacted an American novelist in Singapore who had published a book in Indonesia.

“These three writers (himself included) had one thing in common,” Robert added, “like you, they have a short story published in one of the Silverfish anthologies – a perfect network that you can tap into.”

Later, another writer that Robert had networked with, Sharon Bakar, editor of *Collateral Damage*, stopped by, cementing the fact that Silverfish Books is rapidly becoming known as a place where writers get together.

Unlike the writing workshop that morning, Robert had plenty of time to answer questions from the other writers. He then challenged them to not only find the time to write but also to submit their work for publications in and out of Malaysia.

Raman said, “Many went home motivated that night, motivated enough to finish their book project.”

Before flying back to Penang, Robert Raymer did exactly what he had hoped to accomplish that day – both at the narrative workshop in Penang and at the double book launch in K.L. Inspire others to write.