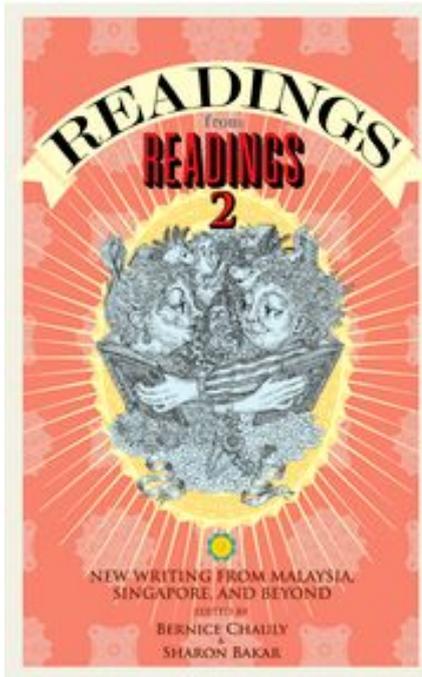


Stories from the heart



Readings From Readings 2

Authors: Various

Editors: Bernice Chauly & Sharon Bakar

Publisher: WordWorks, 206 pages

THERE is a certain magic that comes when writers read their stories aloud.

The written word has power: that we cannot deny. What many of us do not know, however, is that when word becomes sound, this power is amplified. We hear nuances we never expected, see depths we never anticipated.

After all, every story is told in the voice of its author: so what better way to enjoy them than hearing them in their author's actual voice?

Readings From Readings 2 is a collection of stories all previously read aloud at Readings, a live reading event usually held at the Seksan Gallery in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, every month. Founded in 2005, Readings is run by authors/editors

Bernice Chauly and Sharon Bakar, and is KL's longest running literary event.

This second collection is an excellent read, packed with humour, honesty and heartbreak in equal measure, and it is a fine testament to the growing quality of Malaysian writing.

Having attended several Readings events previously, I can say they are generally fun affairs, featuring passionate writers, delightful company, and often, free snacks.

Part of the event's charm is its variety: all kinds of writing are welcome at Readings, fiction or non-fiction, poetry or prose, science fiction or surrealist drama.

Such variety is well reflected here: while the authors contributing are predominantly Malaysian, *Readings From Readings 2* also features the voices of writers from the United States, France, Botswana and India, among other places, all who have previously been featured at Readings events. Some authors, like Alfian Sa'at and Preeta Samarasan, are established veterans, while others are new writers appearing in print for the first time.

Perusing *Readings From Readings 2*, I felt this second collection was stronger than the first, which I also enjoyed. The word limit has been increased to 3,500 words a story, which works out for the better, allowing the tales space to breathe and really develop.

Particularly fun to read was M. Shanmughalingam's *Rani Taxis Away*, a charming tale about a young teacher's first day on the job. Part love story, part coming-of-age tale, Shanmughalingam's story shone due to its humour and engaging characters: I think all of us have met an interfering busybody like its Mrs Kandiah at some point in our lives!

Being a child of the times, I was drawn to the more contemporary stories in the collection, such as Lee Eeelen's quirky *Artificial Rock Aquarium* and Damyanti Ghosh's twisted *An Orchestrated Ending*. Lee's story (which features a delightfully complex pun in its title) is a comical tale of an

androgynous singer who joins a U2 cover band, while Ghosh tells of a scorned writer who decides to take her fate into her own hands.

Especially powerful is Saras Manickam's *Will You Let Him Drink The Wind?*, a harrowing account of a mother raising a mentally disabled adult child. Sometimes angry, sometimes touching, sometimes even shocking, Saras's tale shuns political correctness and sensitivity, resulting in a painfully honest testimony of the challenges faced by people in such situations.

Another that I found interesting was Megat Ishak's *I Can Only See You At Night*, a haunting tale of a man who falls in love with a ghost. Megat's evocative writing turns what sounds like the subject matter of a horror story into a poignant exploration of the lengths we go to for love: his characters are drawn together by brokenness, starkly different yet fundamentally alike. I was sad when the story ended, I wanted to read more of their romance.

My absolute favourite story, however, would have to be Angeline Woon's *Big Bertha And The Stones Of Justice*, the first story in the collection.

Big Bertha tells of Elsie, a snatch theft victim who adopts a rock for protection and soon finds herself in a tense situation where she must choose between justice or mercy. Immensely relatable, the story works on many levels: a tragic commentary on the rampancy of crime in modern society, an unconventional fable on courage and empowerment, a charming narrative of just desserts and wish fulfilment. Few stories have made me actually want to cheer for their protagonists: Woon's is one of them.

Readings From Readings 2 also includes much poetry, most of which is written well. I enjoyed Alina Rastam's *Kuala Lumpur Trilogy* thanks to its striking imagery, as well as Rodaan Al Galidi's satirical *Eight Hundred And Sixty*.

Admittedly, not everything in *Readings From Readings 2* worked for me. I was not fond of Viren Swami's *In Prague*: its format was a little off-putting, and I could not relate to its subject matter.

Gopalan Sellan's *Portrait Of Sivaji Ganesan*, while well-described, felt a little undeveloped.

Additionally, virtually all the stories are in English: it would have been nice if there had been more material in other languages, reflecting the diversity often seen at Readings events.

Despite these minor nitpicks, however, I have to say *Readings From Readings 2* is a stellar read, one that I devoured in one sitting. A delightful collection of voices from Malaysia and beyond, with stories for all tastes and preferences.

TAGS / KEYWORDS:

Lifestyle , Book Review , Readings 2