

## Useful Reference Tool for Researchers in Singapore Literature

*Susan Philip*

Koh Tai Ann. *Singapore Literature in English: An Annotated Bibliography*. Singapore: National Library Board and Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, 2008. (280 pages)

Bibliographies are an invaluable reference tool for researchers and students alike, saving them hours which would otherwise be spent trawling through catalogues and dusty library shelves, or staring endlessly at a computer screen, in search of material on a particular narrow subject. But before anyone embarks on compiling a bibliography, there is an underlying assumption that enough has been written on and about a particular subject to warrant such a compilation. It would appear, from the scope and heft of this bibliography of Singaporean literature in English, that creative and critical activity in Singapore have reached such a stage.

Koh Tai Ann's annotated bibliography is a timely and useful piece of work which seeks to cover a wide and inclusive range of creative work emerging from Singapore. She contends that a "literary canon of Singapore writers in English is already discernible" (5). However, in choosing what to include in this bibliography, she has not limited herself to the 'canonical' – that is, her approach is inclusive rather than exclusive. Her bibliography "makes no literary or such judgments, leaving that to readers, time and posterity" (5). The result is a bibliography which provides a strong sense of the history from which current writing has emerged, as well as a sense of the breadth and variety of writing which exists in Singapore today.

Koh has chosen to limit herself to what used to be called 'creative' writing – a label she now rejects as being inadequate in some ways, and inaccurate in others. She chooses to call it 'Singapore Literature in English', but adds a caveat – that what she includes might not be 'literary' in the usual sense of the word, but is "literature in the generic sense of imaginative writing expressed in any of the main literary forms" (5). This bibliography specifically *excludes* literary essays and criticism, children's books (both of which categories already have bibliographies) and non-fiction (though, as she admits, the line between fiction and non-fiction can be blurred). Koh also excludes humour writing and translated works. The result is a bibliography which is able to go into considerable depth and detail, because of its narrow scope.

This bibliography is divided into the following categories: novels, short stories, poetry, drama, anthologies, miscellaneous, periodicals, and electronic journals. By

casting her net this far, Koh seeks to ensure that as little writing as possible falls through the cracks: for example, early works by poets who have since published anthologies of their own work, might be found in general anthologies of poetry, or in the many literary periodicals which have flourished in Singapore at one time or another. A subset of this category is electronic journals – an increasingly important venue for publication of new and challenging work.

She also ensures that her bibliography is comprehensive by including work that is not published; here, she has to bow to the vagaries of the artform. Most novels and short stories will find their way into print. For drama, however, the main aim is performance rather than publication, and some plays still exist only in typescript. Where possible (for example, if the typescripts are in the National Library collection), Koh has included details of these works.

One of the more interesting categories Koh includes is 'Miscellaneous', which "contains a unique, otherwise unclassifiable form of publication – the ephemeral printed programmes of public readings and performances by poets and others" (13). These ephemera are important for giving us a sense of the historical development of the literature. As Koh points out, these programmes were for readings and performances of works "by then emerging and young unpublished writers such as Arthur Yap, Lee Tzu Pheng, Robert Yeo and others" (13). Such concrete evidence of their development into the leading writers of today allows for a sense of historicization, and enables today's newer writers to site themselves within a continuum of Singaporean writers.

Wherever possible, Koh includes a summary or abstract of the work in question, though this is not really feasible in the case of poetry. She also gives information as to where these works can be accessed – at which library, call number, and so on. The book thus succeeds as a handy and practical aid to research in the field of Singapore literature. Anyone who does research in this field should ensure that they have easy access to this bibliography.