

Pandemic Power List: Arts & lifestyle

Poet Marylyn Tan blazes the trail with Singapore Literature Prize win

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Ms Marylyn Tan was also the first female poet to score a solo win in the prize's 28 years.

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MARYLYN TAN, 27

Poet

Marylyn Tan made literary history this year by becoming the first woman to win the Singapore Literature Prize for English poetry.

She was also the first female poet to score a solo win in the prize's 28 years. Her experimental, subversive debut collection, *Gaze Back*, was praised by the judges as "a clarion call for gender and linguistic reclamation".

This made Tan, who was one of the youngest shortlisted for the prize this year, a pioneer at the tender age of 27.

"I don't know that it's changed my life," she says of her win.

"Maybe it just gives greater power to the point of the writing - which is to make the world a safer, more equitable place, and to overturn the dominant ideologies that perpetuate daily fear for disenfranchised minorities."

Gaze Back, which was published by Ethos Books, takes its title from French feminist theorist Helene Cixous' essay *The Laugh Of The Medusa*, which refers to the Greek myth of the Gorgon whose gaze turns men to stone.

It pushes boundaries, both in form and content, and tackles taboo topics such as menstruation, female sexuality and witchcraft.

It was also shortlisted for the Lambda Literary Awards, a notable United States-based prize for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender works.

Tan's win earns her a spot on this year's Life Power List.

"I am assuming it is a list of people with outrageous amounts of life force surging within their tiny bodies," she quips. "Or maybe it's about dismantling oppressive power structures. Either way, I'm into it."

Before her, the Singapore Literature Prize for poetry had almost entirely been won by men.

Hartinah Ahmad won the prize for Malay poetry in 2016 for anthology *Tafsiran Tiga Alam*, which she co-authored with Hamed Ismail and Samsudin Said.

In 2014, Krishnamurthi Mathangi received a commendation for Tamil poetry for her collection Malaigalin Parathal.

Tan was taken aback by her victory. She had written Gaze Back for a "very niche and marginalised audience" and never expected to get a nod from the establishment.

She works in the register of shock and discomfort.



"At its core, discomfort allows us to feel very viscerally what is wrong," she says. "If you are uncomfortable with something, that is more than an unpleasantness - it is an opportunity to observe the ugly thing in its fullest capacity.

"I find discomfort a great tool for empowerment or even awakening. If you look at a piece of art and you find that it nauseates you or it makes you feel itchy all over - it's an accomplishment in itself. It's a big deal for artists to be able to garner that kind of response to their work."

She studied linguistics at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and now works as a contract curriculum writer.

Since her win, she has started an interdisciplinary artist collective, Dis/Content, which last month live-streamed a showing in

collaboration with NTU Unmasked and will hold its first official showcase in February next year.

"We have a mix of post-modern poetry, ritual, object-oriented ontology and experimental linguistics, and are looking very much forward to seeing how everything plays with itself and each other," she says.

As for herself, she resolves to continue to "kick down the door, to disrupt the status quo and to drink more water".

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