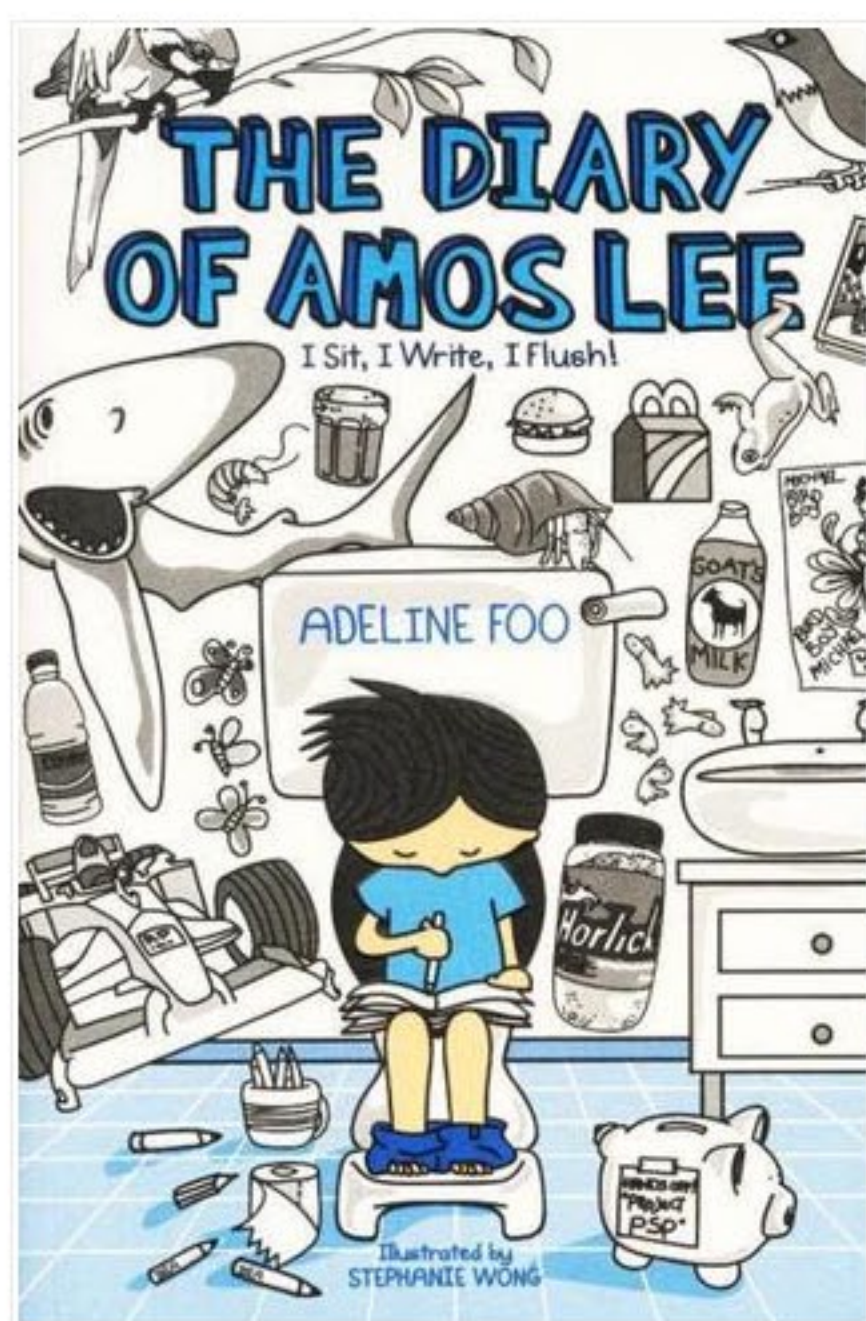


## Neighbourhood voices

ANU KUMAR



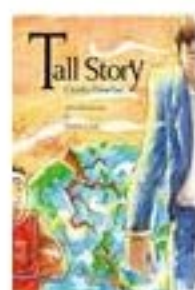
*In the Asian Festival of Children's Content, to be held later this month in Singapore, we finally have a platform for interaction and exchange of ideas on children's literature.*

**The Diary of Amos Lee** begins in a fascinating way. Amos in his first book, *I sit, I write I flush*, tells us that he begins to write because his mother suggests it to him, as long as he doesn't spend too much time in the bathroom. There are now four Amos Lee books written by the Singapore based Adeline Foo. A television series has been made on him and the books have been released in several countries, including India.

Amos' quirky popularity in turn tells you many things about the state of children's literature, and the vital place it has in Asia Pacific and South Asia. Amos is a character who can "travel", and insert himself with cheeky ease into parallel childhoods everywhere. The ease of identification with Amos Lee is evidence that children's book characters can inspire loyalties that can no longer be claimed automatically by those from the West. It reveals too that the world of children's literature and publishing is a multi-dimensional and collaborative enterprise, something that the Asian Festival of Children's Content (AFCC) represents, and hopes to build on, in its third edition, to be held over three days in May.

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A sentiment reflected in what Vatsala Kaul-Banerjee, editorial director of children's books at Hachette India has to say, "I'm really looking forward to attending the AFCC in Singapore, because there are so few platforms in India that feature children's books or writing for children. Hachette India's 'relationship' with Singapore began when we bought the rights to publish Singapore author Adeline Foo's *The Diary of Amos Lee* series last year. Subsequently, Adeline was invited to India at Bookaroo, and the series is a popular and leading seller for Hachette India. We also have Singapore-based author Grant Clark's *Monkey Magic* series on our list. Singapore is culturally akin to us in many ways and it will be exciting to present Hachette India's top-notch children's and YA books there, as well as share and exchange ideas, at this rather unique platform that the AFCC offers."

The AFCC brings under one roof writers, translators, editors and illustrators, as well as publishers and readers; in fact everyone who in some form or another is associated with the vast universe that makes up children's literature. As the festival director R. Ramachandran explains, it grew out of a need to make children aware of Asia's own diverse and rich culture and traditions through the promotion of literature and reading. For a long time, Asian writing for children was just not visible, either for education and entertainment purposes and the AFCC not just fills a void but it makes the world of children's literature more complete, and representative.

Already children make for more active readers. The World over, children's books form a large portion of total book publications and sales, and they read and watch, for, reading is now increasingly a touch and visual experience, in a variety of formats. One of the major objectives this year's AFCC will work towards is sustainable and interactive reading habits, primarily by reaching out to parents, teachers and children.

### Illustrious names

Among those present at this year's AFCC will be writers such as Uma Krishnaswami, author of several books including **The Grand Plan to Fix Everything** and also **Book Uncle** that won the Scholastic Book Award, given away at the AFCC last year. *Grand Plan* speaks to every tween's secret dream when eight-year-old Dini moves from the U.S. to India, to accompany her mother and through a series of fascinating and convoluted turns, meets the movie star she idolises. There is also Nury Vittachi, based in Hong Kong, author of the Feng Shui detective series and books such as **The Day it Rained Letters**. Also attending are Candy Gourlay, whose book **Tall Story** won a major award last year and Margaret Kerrison, author of many television animation shows for children, including a series about a fearsome combat robot turned into a domestic helper by a wacky earthling family.

Among the most popular features of the AFCC is the Big Illustrators Gallery that showcases works by major illustrators of children's books in this region. This year, like before, there will be Yusuf Gajah, Malaysian artist and writer whose books for children such as *Elephabet* and *Where is my Red Ball?*, easily recognisable by Gajah's beloved motif of the elephant figure, are entertaining and also immensely educative. Last year's show featured illustrators such as Jade Fang and Li Dan, and attending this year will be Suzy Lee and Marjorie von Heerden. Among the many events that formed a run-up to the AFCC was a talk on the Singapore-born British illustrator and animation filmmaker Errol le Cain. He illustrated numerous children's books and even wrote several of his own. Le Cain's life illustrates in part that the world of children's literature is a border-crossing one.

This year's AFCC is guaranteed to be bigger and better in scope. As Ramachandran reveals, a new award, the SingTel Asian Picture Book Award, has been instituted. There is also a workshop planned for parents, teachers and children to help build and sustain reading habits effectively. Other useful sessions include Creative Writing for Children, Fun with Paper Folding, a Drama Workshop for Children and a special session on Storytelling for Children. And to ensure that the AFCC is not a one-off affair, there are plans of putting in place a regular programme of sending writers and illustrators to schools to interact with children and teachers.