12 years in the making
Simon Tay's book went from a novella to a prize-winner

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by Mayo Martin

Last year, author, lawyer and Today columnist Simon Tay was dubbed "Singapore's answer to Haruki Murakami" by international current affairs magazine Monocle. Thanks to a debut novel that took 12 years to write.

Tay's City Of Small Blessings - the story of a retired Singaporean named Bryan who comes back from Canada to a home wracked by changes - was the recipient of this year's Singapore Literature Prize in the English category.

Other recipients are Chia Joo Ming's novel M40, Wu Yeow Chong's poetry volume A Half-Existence (Chinese), Johar Buang's poetry book Sampai di Singgahsana (Malay), and Muragathasan's poetry book Sangamam (Tamil). Organised by the National Book Development Council of Singapore, the biannual event recognises the best works published in the last two years.

Tay said City Of Small Blessings started as a 90-page novella a decade ago. "When I finished it, I didn't know how to do more. Ninety pages to me is long, and I was still trying to learn how to go longer. I think the long gestation period helped me," said Tay, 49. It was a period where the current chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs kept busy first as a Nominated Member of Parliament and then as chairperson of the National Environment Agency.

"A lot of these went into the book. You can make a strength out of taking a long time because there's more to put inside," said Tay, who cites as influences poets Edwin Thumboo and the late Arthur Yap, as well as novelists Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Ernest Hemingway and yes, Murakami.

"If you really want to do something, there will be time. People in Singapore underrate what it is they really want to do. For me, though I have different jobs, I've always seen myself as a writer."

Tay has been on the road promoting his other book on international affairs, Asia Alone: The Dangerous Post Crisis Divide From America, which was published earlier this year. He plans on taking four weeks off from work next year to write his next book, which will hopefully be a volume of short fiction.

"It will take less than 12 years," he quipped. Mayo Martin