



Heidi Shamsuddin

## **An Interview with Heidi Shamsuddin**

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**H**eidi Shamsuddin is an award-winning Malaysian author of stories inspired by Asian history and mythology, for both adults and children. Her very first children's book, *Johan the Bee Hunter*, won the regional prize for the Eye Level Children's Literature Competition in 2012. This was followed by her middle-grade series, *The Door Under the Stairs* (Oyez Books), which revolves around three children who discover a magical door that transports them to the past where they meet key figures from Malaysian history, of which six books have been published since 2015: *The Mystery of the Missing National Anthem*, *The Case of the Talented Trio*, *The Case of the Football Champion*, *The Case of the House at No. 74*, *The Case of the Missing Elephants*, and *The Case of the Warrior Queen*. Her other publications include *Chickaboo, the Runaway Ostrich* (2017) and *Kayu of Manis Valley* (2018), both brought out by MPH Publishing. The 2D animated short film, *Batik Girl*, for which she wrote the story and screenplay, premiered in 2019, and has been showcased at 26 film festivals in 17 different countries. It has

received, among others, the Best Animated Short Film prize at the *Festival de Largos y Cortos de Santiago* in Chile, and the Gold Medal in the Regional Category of the 20<sup>th</sup> DigiCon6 Asia Awards in Japan. Her short stories have been published in *Remang: An Anthology of Ghostly Tales* (2017, Terror Books) and the Fixi Novo anthologies, *PJ Confidential* (2016), *Chronicles of KK* (2016), *Micro Malaysians* (2017), and *Little Basket* (2018).

This interview focuses on her work as an author of Malaysian children's literature and was conducted over email in March 2020.

**Sharifah Aishah Osman: Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Heidi. Could you tell us what made you decide to turn to writing children's books, from your former career as a maritime lawyer and also a restaurateur?**

**Heidi Shamsuddin:** I'd never really set out to become a writer and I suppose it happened quite naturally. I worked several years in London as a maritime lawyer which involved writing in quite a specific way. In my submissions to clients, I had to write economically by making my points clear in the shortest amount of time, which is, coincidentally, the requirements you need to write for younger people. When I came back to Malaysia, I wanted to do something completely different so I started a restaurant, which opened my world to new people and experiences. After I sold off the business, I had some time to consider my options and decided to have a go at writing books.

**Who or what were your key influences growing up? Did you have any particular favourite authors as a child, and how did their writings shape your own perspective as a children's book author?**

I spent my early reading years (ages 6 to 10) growing up in the United States so I was heavily influenced by the books we had in our school and public library. I grew up reading the classics – *Black Beauty*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Arabian Nights*. We didn't have many books at home but I remember two books my father gave me for my 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> birthday which were *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More* by Roald Dahl, and a beautifully illustrated *Andersen's Fairy Tales*. I think I was most definitely influenced by Roald Dahl's wit and wonderful use of language and adventure in his books and I wanted to try to convey that sense of fun in my *Door Under the Stairs* books. I was, and still am, influenced by the structure and form of fairy tales in my writing.

**How significant is the idea of history and heritage for you in your storytelling? Based on your work with *The Door Under the Stairs* series, for instance, did you deliberately set out to write a form of historical fiction for Malaysian children using the mystery genre?**

It depends on the story I'm writing. If the story can best be told within a framework of history or culture, then I'll use it as it provides more texture and meaning to the story. For *The Door under the Stairs* series, I deliberately set out to write a form of historical fiction mainly because I hadn't seen this in local books before and thought it would be fun to find an interesting aspect of our history and turn it into a mystery. For example, in the first book, the national anthem mysteriously disappears. This gave me an excuse to make the characters find out how we got our national anthem in the first place. For the Sybil Kathigasu story, the main point of interest was obviously her wireless radio, which was hidden under the floorboards of her house in Papan, Perak. I hope that these tiny details will spark the readers' imagination and perhaps make them want to find out more about that particular time in history.

**I loved the fact that Emil, Hanna and Joe, the characters in *The Door Under the Stairs* series, are not just close friends but also intelligent, creative thinkers and problem-solvers, who work together to solve the mystery in each book. How important is the idea of children's agency and self-determination in your storytelling and characterization techniques?**

In all my books and stories, the central question I always ask myself is, what do my characters want? When I use this as a determining question, it more or less forces my characters to be active in order to try to gain the thing they want. As a result, the characters will usually tend to change and adapt as the story progresses. I think this is quite important, especially when writing for younger readers, because a character who does nothing or simply allows events to happen to her or him is, frankly, not very interesting. If you're going to write for children, the number one rule is that the story must never be dull. Children are the harshest of critics – if they don't like a book, they will simply put it down and never read it again.

**What is your stance on diversity and multiculturalism in children’s books? How do your own books address these themes?**

Obviously, I am all for multiculturalism and diversity in books in general, and not just in children’s books. We need more books which represent our world. My books are all set in Malaysia or feature Malaysians simply because I want to write about people and events I’m familiar with. I know these books will probably not be popular outside of Malaysia but I’m fine with that. For now, I want to write for Malaysians.

**Congratulations on all the accolades that *Batik Girl* has been receiving globally. How did the story for *Batik Girl* come about? Apart from the obvious cultural reference to the art of batik, how do you see this film as being uniquely Malaysian, or reflective of aspects of Malaysian culture and heritage?**

I was at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair in 2017 and came across the Silent Book exhibition. It’s quite amazing to see a story told in pictures from all over the world. As there’s no language barrier, the story is accessible to everyone. I was inspired to “write” a silent book and was fishing around for a theme when I noticed that many people came to the Malaysian booth not just to look at our books, but also to admire the batik tablecloth that we had used to decorate the booth. I’ve always loved batik and thought that a story using batik motifs and symbols would make the perfect theme for a silent book.

*Batik Girl* is uniquely Malaysian in that we set out to use elements from Malaysian batik (as opposed to Indonesian or Thai batik, or batik from other parts of the world). The story is set in Terengganu and features the landscape and architecture of that state. We actually went to the specific beach, house and batik workshop in order to capture the details of the location. However, the actual story is quite universal in nature in that it is about the death of a loved one and how to deal with its consequences. I believe the film resonated with many people because of the combination of these two elements.

**I was struck by how the film was able to sensitively portray the young protagonist’s grief over the death of her parents, and how the relationship between her and her grandmother deepens as they bond through the art of batik-painting, enabling her to cope and gradually heal. Is the metaphorical journey from innocence to maturity a central theme in all your writings for children, and if so, how did you consciously work it into the plot and narrative of *Batik Girl*?**

I'm heavily influenced by fairy tales and I suppose the journey from innocence to maturity is a central theme in my writing. However, there will always be obstacles and difficulties along the way because that's what life is like. It is these obstacles that create conflict and make the story come alive.

*Batik Girl* is really about grief and how a young person copes with this feeling of loss. We worked it into the plot by making Batik Girl go on a journey through a typical piece of batik cloth, and used the symbolism and motifs in the batik art to represent that journey. There were three distinct locations in the batik world (the jungle, sea and mountain) and in each location she had to undergo an obstacle. We left the interpretation of these obstacles to the viewer, so for example in the jungle scene, the vines could be said to represent feelings of being trapped or being alone. At the end of the journey, Batik Girl realizes that the shadow pursuing her is not there to harm her, but to keep her safe and provide protection. There are many hidden riddles and meanings in this film which we've deliberately not explained for now as we want the viewers to interpret this for themselves. I think this is the special thing about *Batik Girl* – you can watch it many times and interpret it in many different ways.

**How do you see the future of children's literature in Malaysia, and your own role in its development? How can parents, publishers, educators, and communities cultivate a more supportive and engaging environment for young readers of fiction, especially with the challenges of the digital age?**

I hope that the future of children's literature in Malaysia will continue to grow and become stronger. However, this may take time because at the moment, I can't really see measures in place to promote and strengthen this area. We need more good quality local books in terms of better content, editing, and illustrations. It's great that more writers are interested in writing for children and I'm happy that publishers are actively publishing more children's books. However, more has to be done to promote and encourage people to read and buy local books. We are not only in competition with books from abroad, but we're also competing with the internet and other forms of media. Parents can help by reading to children when they're young to cultivate a love of books. Publishers can help by publishing and promoting more children's books and by allocating a bigger budget for editing, artwork and promotions. Educators, by allocating more time in the school timetable for storytelling and literacy activities. For me, speaking as a writer, I believe that my main contribution is to produce the best content I can for readers.

**As an experienced and well-published author, what advice or suggestions would you give to those keen on writing and producing material for young Malaysian readers?**

All of us are profoundly affected by the books and stories we read as children. Someone who writes for young people, therefore, has a responsibility to make sure that what they are writing is not only interesting, but also honest and true. If you think about it, what we write can potentially plant the seed of an idea or a concept in a young person's mind. My advice, if you're going to write for children, is to do your best, make sure the story is riveting so that the reader will want to continue to read. Make sure you don't look down on or patronise your young readers. You must treat them with respect. Most of all, even if you're writing something that is completely made-up, make sure there is a layer of truth behind it.

**What are you currently working on and what other projects can we expect from you in the near future?**

There will be two more books in *The Door Under the Stairs* series. I will have an illustrated children's book based on *Hikayat Raja Babi* out later this year and I am now working on a collection of fairy tales and folklore from around the Nusantara region. The Nusantara Fairy Tale book is a labour of love which has taken almost three years to complete. I wouldn't say it is strictly a children's book because it contains notes regarding the provenance of the stories and my thoughts on how these stories have travelled around the region, which is something I am very interested in.

**Thank you so much for your responses, Heidi. We look forward to your future publications, and wish you all the best in your endeavours.**