

Books

Are HK's gay writers happy?

While many among the city's LGBT writers struggle with the fear of discrimination, stories of small victories keep seeping out of the closet, finds **Melanie Ho**.

When Hong Kong author Nigel Collett first began looking into the 1980 death of John MacLennan, a Hong Kong police officer whose death came hours before he was to be arrested for committing homosexual acts, Collett was unsure what he would find.

"When I first came to the case, I knew it was something quite important for Hong Kong history," he says. "The handling of the case says quite a lot about how the colonial government behaved in Hong Kong. It was quite important as it changed the law on homosexuality in 1991. When I started to read the material and got to know more about the man at the center of the case, I thought it was time to write his story. No one had done him justice."

Collett first came to the project in 2011, following a suggestion from his friends, Aileen and Ken Bridgewater. Collett had been aware of the case. After finishing his biography of Leslie Cheung, he was looking for a new project. After five years of research and writing, Collett completed the manuscript in 2016. *A Death in Hong Kong: The MacLennan Case of 1980 and the Suppression of a Scandal* was published in March 2018 by City University of Hong Kong Press, having won the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong History Book Prize in 2017.

"I felt a responsibility to get this one right," Collett says. "I was quite conscious that the book would be controversial and I felt responsible to John MacLennan to get it as right as I could. In the early days, it was a bit intimidating. But I was determined to get on with it, despite feeling the weight on my shoulders. I wasn't doing something fun — I couldn't screw it up."

The result is a thoughtful, comprehensive and thoroughly researched book, one that puts MacLennan's death in a historical and social context.

Safety first

While two of Collett's three books have been about LGBT issues, the writer says this is a coincidence. "The first book was straight military biography. I was invited to write about Leslie Cheung as an actor and a singer and it wasn't specifically because of the gay element, and for this one (MacLennan case) I hadn't gone looking for it."

While Collett would be happy to tell more stories of sexual minorities, he's also aware that finding the information isn't easy. "I was lucky with Leslie Cheung and the John MacLennan case was in the public record, but when you go looking for others, it's very tricky."

In 2008, Collett co-founded the Tongzhi Literary Group, an organization that fosters writing by the sexual minorities in Hong Kong. After moderating a session for the Hong Kong International Literary Festival on gay writers in Hong Kong, Collett was inspired to start a group with some of them.

"It was quite an eye opener, finding eight local Hong Kong Chinese writers for the panel," he says. "None of them knew each other. A couple didn't want to be on the panel and sat in the audience. There was no culture of writing, they never got together."

Collett says the local Chinese LGBT writers have it a lot tougher. "Some of them have to be extraordinarily careful in not identifying who they are. An example would be that the best and most widely read writer of Chinese novels cannot identify who he is and writes under a



Author Nigel Collett founded Tongzhi Literary Group to let Hong Kong's sexual minorities have a voice. PHOTOS BY EDMOND TANG / CHINA DAILY

pseudonym. Hong Kong's best in the writing world is still in the closet."

Hong Kong historian and writer Jason Wordie agrees. Wordie, who has published five books on local history and is a newspaper columnist, says that more opportunities for LGBT writers are needed, but "the opportunity comes down to whether people are safe to write." "I say this because Hong Kong doesn't have any anti-discriminatory law. Someone who may want to write with an LGBT theme might say 'I can't' or 'I can write that, but I can't publish it or (it has to be) under a pseudonym just for safety reasons.'"

Collett, who is now working on a biography of E. M. Forster, agrees. "There needs to be an anti-discrimination law in terms of sexual and gender identity to make it safe. The second area is education. The Hong Kong education system is in dire need of some form of education."

Wordie's approach to incorporating LGBT themes into his own writing focuses on how these integrate into the bigger story. "When I've included an LGBT theme in my writing, it's part of the bigger tapestry rather than being in the forefront. It needs to be worth saying, rather than a visibility issue," he says. "In some of my columns, I've included gay points and themes if I felt it mattered."



Historian Jason Wordie feels seeking recognition for LGBT writers will help quality writing to emerge from the shadows.

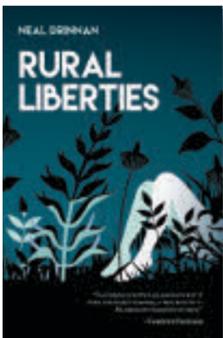
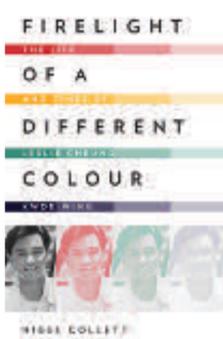
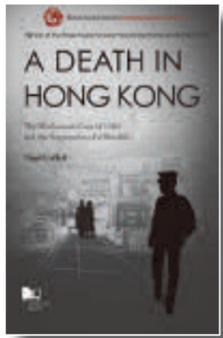
Say it with pride

Local English-language publisher Signal 8 is supporting writing by the sexual minorities by publishing two anthologies due out later this year.

"We're bringing out a couple of LGBT+ anthologies, one of short stories and one of non-fiction," said Anshuman Das of Signal 8 Press. "The view is to provide a snapshot of LGBT writing in the region. The last LGBT anthology in the region was a long time ago and we'd like to kind of revive that."

All three writers agree there needs to be more opportunities for sexual minorities to write and be published. Wordie also puts the issue of opportunity into the larger context of the arts and arts funding.

"I see it as a wider issue — the drive toward quality and a recognition of the fact that producing art costs money," he says. "Quality needs some form of subsidization. All this is linked into the wider issue of identifiable quality. I'd like to go for quality and visibility."



IF YOU GO

Hong Kong Book Fair
Venue: Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, 1 Harbour Road, Wan Chai
Dates: July 18-24
<http://hkbookfair.hktdc.com>

Poetry OutLoud
Venue: Fringe Club, 2 Lower Albert Road, Central
Dates: First Wednesday of the month at 7:45 pm
www.facebook.com/PoetryOutLoudHK

Peel Street Poetry
Venue: Social Room, Won Hing Building, 74-78 Stanley Street, Central
Dates: 2nd and 3rd Wednesday of the month, at 8 pm
www.facebook.com/peel-streetpoetry



Poetry

POEMS ARE FOR READING OUT LOUD

By **MELANIE HO**

David McKirdy went to check out a Poetry OutLoud event in Hong Kong and decided to participate on the spot.

"I read a poem, they clapped and haven't been able to shake me off since," he says.

McKirdy has been part of the group since 1999, and as Poetry OutLoud celebrates its 20th anniversary this year McKirdy says it's still as easy as ever to participate. Interested readers or listeners simply need to show up.

"I am most proud that OutLoud continues to be open to poetry, prose and spoken word performances, welcomes participants who read in any language and is a group where many first-time readers and writers have felt comfortable enough to read their work. It is multicultural, multi-racial, gender neutral and attracts the young and old alike," he says.

Poetry OutLoud hosts readings on the first Wednesday of every month at the Fringe Club. There's no sign-up or membership required. Attendance ebbs and flows. Sometimes there's only a small, intimate group of 10 and at other months a larger group of about 50. But McKirdy, who has published two collections of poetry, *Accidental Occidental* and *Ancestral Worship*, says it's not about the numbers: "If one person turns up, I will hold the event."

In Hong Kong, Wednesday evenings are seemingly devoted to poetry. In addition



Peel Street Poetry gigs are held on most Wednesdays since the last 12 years.

to OutLoud's monthly event, Peel Street Poetry hosts weekly Wednesday readings — unless Poetry OutLoud is on.

"We just picked a random day of the week and it was purely coincidental," recalls Nashua Gallagher, who founded Peel Street Poetry 12 years ago as a teenager. "But we don't run on the first Wednesday of the month because we don't want people to have to choose."

Gallagher recently launched her debut collection of poems, *All the Words a Stage*. Like McKirdy, Gallagher grew up in Hong Kong and started writing poetry

as a teenager. Her autobiographical book takes readers through the different stages of her life, from coming of age and having children to love and confronting adult issues. Many of the poems were read at the Wednesday night open mic sessions. Reading every week meant she had to write to a deadline — a routine Gallagher feels hugely beneficial in the long run.

"It's very collaborative," she says. "And this is not just the English-speaking poets, it's the same with the Chinese poetry scene — you get the same vibe that everyone is encouraging. Poets have always

been wonderful, accidental social commentators and the different perspectives are incredibly interesting. They are useful in reminding you of the importance of thought and diversity."

Gallagher is participating in a session at the ongoing Hong Kong Book Fair, where she'll read some Baroque poems at an event on love poetry and prose from the Spanish-speaking world. The event is part of the book fair's theme of romantic literature. Gallagher will also moderate a session featuring Singapore's Balli Kaur Jaswal who wrote *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*.

Gallagher is looking forward to taking part in both events and continuing being a part of Hong Kong's active — and growing — poetry scene.

"Traditionally, poetry events have been smaller and didn't get as much attention," she says. "I think technology has democratized access to different parts of literature, and poetry and spoken word have benefitted from it. Poetry is an honest and raw art form and can carry you through whatever stage of life you're in. It can help chronicle those stages."



Nashua Gallagher (top) and David McKirdy are the driving forces behind two of the city's weekly poetry-reading meets. PHOTOS BY JILL CARTER / FOR CHINA DAILY

