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## **An Interview with Emila Yusuf**

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Emila Yusuf

**E**mila Yusof is an award-winning writer and illustrator of picture books. Her ‘Dina’ series, comprising *My Mother’s Garden* (2010), *My Mother’s Kitchen* (2014), and *My Father’s Farm* (2015), introduces young children to familiar aspects of Malaysian life through the brightly-illustrated adventures of little Dina and the picture dictionaries which form the final pages of each book. The series has won accolades in Malaysia and Singapore, and *My Mother’s Garden* has been further published as a German e-book and an animated book in Taiwanese Mandarin. Her most recent works are *Hearts*, a wordless book, and *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, a retelling of the legend of a mystical princess who lived at the time of the Malaccan sultanate. Emila has also illustrated books for children by other authors, including Raman’s *Legendary Princesses of Malaysia* (2014). Although she is also known for her collection of illustrated haiku and the *Colourart* series of colouring books for adults, this interview focuses on her work in children’s literature. It is compiled from an email exchange and a face-to-face meeting which took place in October and November 2018, respectively.

**Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Emila. You describe yourself as a self-taught illustrator. How did you begin working in this line?**

Ever since I was a little girl, I’ve always liked to draw. In school, I paid extra attention in art class. In fact, I switched Additional Mathematics for Art in secondary school - partly because I didn’t think I’d pass Ad Maths! - but drawing was always something I enjoyed.

From 1995 to 1998, I worked at a broadcasting company. The company advertised for a graphic artist and the only requirement was a credit in art. So I went and I got the job, and they taught me how to use the different software programs to put together and edit designs. When the company ran into some problems because of the

Asian Economic Crisis, I got another job doing desktop graphics, which is quite different. I was designing packaging and things like that. After nine years I quit because I saw no reason for continuing. My passion was to paint. So I went freelance and did different contract jobs. One day I went to a bookshop to look for a book of local nursery rhymes but I couldn't find one. So I went home, found some *pantun rakyat*, and started putting my own drawings to these rhymes. But that was never published. I did give the mock-up to my friend who showed it to a publisher, but the publisher said it would be too expensive to print. You know what children's books are like, with full colours from cover to cover.

A few years after that, I met a regional advisor for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She asked if I wanted to be part of an exhibition, so I joined in with whatever original illustrations I already had. She then asked if I had any manuscripts and I showed her what I had. She was interested in publishing it but said the illustrations had to be less generic and more local in flavour. That became *My Mother's Garden*. In the original manuscript, Dina wasn't wearing *baju kurung*, just a t-shirt and pair of trousers. The artwork was simpler too. So, I took another year to make corrections and the book was published in 2010.

**Your Dina series has been very well-received. Could you tell us about the inspiration behind the character and the circumstances we see her in? Were you influenced by the books you read as a child?**

I mostly read children's stories like those written by Enid Blyton and Hans Christian Anderson, as well as Aesop's Fables. I also loved to read the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew series. I never read picture books because my father never bought them. My mother likes to plant flowers and this inspired me to write *My Mother's Garden*. My mother would also go to work, so I learnt how to cook from as young as ten years old. I learnt to cook curry, *masak lemak*, and few other dishes from my mother. This inspired me to write *My Mother's Kitchen*. However, *My Father's Farm* was inspired by my late father-in-law's farm as well as my own father's farm. My father-in-law had some chicken and goats, while my father has some milk cows and fish ponds. The goose from the book, however, is based on my experience living in a squatter area in Kampung Pandan in the 80s.

***My Mother's Garden* has been translated and marketed in Germany and Taiwan. What do you think has made it so popular?**

Children around the world can relate to the garden. Also, most of the flowers can be found in both countries.

**It is a truism that things get lost in translation. Does this apply to books for young children, which typically rely heavily on illustrations and use simpler words?**

I don't think the content of picture books will get lost in translation. Publishers work with the authors to make sure that they get things translated correctly. For the German version of *My Mother's Garden*, for example, the German publisher worked closely with me to ensure that their translation matched my text.

**What about cultural translation? Was it necessary to make changes to the content of *My Mother's Garden* to better fit it to an international audience?**

Only a little bit. They just added a simple explanation saying that the girl is from Malaysia, an Asian country which has a tropical climate and certain traditional attire. The text itself is very simple and doesn't mention cultural practices. It is just about flowers, insects and a garden.

**Your work does seem to emphasise Malaysian flora. I'm thinking not only of *My Mother's Garden* but also of the details you include when illustrating other books. Is it important to you to feature local flora?**

As I said, my mother likes to plant flowers. And I grew up partly in Melaka and in Pahang where nature surrounded me. I was also born in a lush forest by the Lipis River in a small village in Raub.

**Tell us more about *Hearts*. What led you to forego the use words altogether?**

There was not even one wordless book in Malaysia, whereas other countries have already published a lot of these. So I thought, why not I give it a try. Wordless books help children to create their own story in whatever way they like it. Wordless books help convey the message of the story without the anxiety associated with text.

**You recently wrote and illustrated *Puteri Gunung Ledang*. What drew you to this story? Why would such a well-known and oft-repeated tale need to be told yet again?**

Why not? I'm adding to the options that are already out there. I've read so many versions of the story and normally they tell us more about the king and his angle on things. But I tell it from the perspective of the *puteri*

herself. What did she see? How did she feel? I just tried to imagine how it would be like in her situation. And I retell it in a very different way: a poetic style to match the batik-style illustration.

**Could you tell us about the inspiration for the batik motif in *Puteri Gunung Ledang*?**

When I looked at the other illustrations I had already done, they looked too commercial and almost generic. I wanted something that looked more organically Malaysian, even in the motifs and patterns. So I thought of batik. I looked at some batik samples, put them aside, then came up with my own design. But I didn't use the traditional method which involves the use of wax. I used mainly watercolour, with a white pen for the outlines and acrylic for the background.

**Why is the character wearing a *baju kebaya*?**

You're right to ask. Historically, it might have been just a cloth, the *kemban*. But with *Legendary Princesses of Malaysia*, some people complained about the way I drew the ladies with their shoulders uncovered. I said to them, 'Historically, they didn't cover up, you know. People then weren't sewing *baju kurung*; they just *kemban* and *ikat*.' There was even a local publisher who wanted to buy the rights to publish the book in Malay, but when they saw the illustrations, they changed their mind. But it hasn't affected sales. *Legendary Princesses* is one of its publisher's top-selling books. Anyway, this time, I thought, let's just keep everyone happy.

**The *Legendary Princesses* storybook was followed by a *Princesses of Malaysia Colouring Book* (2006).**

**Did you make any changes to the illustrations in response to the criticism you've just described?**

No, I didn't want to change anything. I wanted to stick with my illustrations and defend them. Thankfully, the publisher didn't have any problems with this.

**How would you describe the children's literature scene in Malaysia? How has it changed in the ten years that you have been part of it?**

Ten years ago, as I mentioned, it was very hard for me to get my first book published because the cost of publishing full-coloured picture books was extremely high. Nowadays, I think, it is more affordable. But many

publishers have recently stopped publishing picture books because they cannot make a lot of profit from them. I cannot blame them. Most parents here don't think it's important to buy children books. Parents also think the books are too expensive, at RM 25 or RM30 each. They feel it's too much to pay for a children's book, with just pictures and so little text. And the *lelong-lelong* sales really spoil the market. People expect to go to these things to buy cheap books, so it makes it difficult for local writers and illustrators. We can only hope to have foreign companies buy the rights and sell them overseas.

**Is there better demand for children's books overseas?**

Yes. Much better. But foreign publishers usually don't want books that deal with our local culture. They look for more global content, such those which deal with current issues like child abuse, the refugee crisis, or the environment. These are things which people all over can relate to. But at the Frankfurt Book Festival this year, three French publishers were interested in buying the rights to *Puteri Gunung Ledang*. Maybe they're collecting folktales from around the world, I don't know.

**Do you think things will change locally? How can the state help?**

Not unless the mentality of parents changes. Well, it's their money – they can spend it as they wish. What we can do for now is to educate the children so when they grow up, they will want books for their kids. The government...[laughs]... I don't know. They have problems with the school system and other things. I don't think they will pay attention to picture books. We're not a priority!

**What can we expect from you in the near future?**

I'm hoping to have a series of local princess stories. I've been reading about Huminodun, the Sabahan princess who sacrifices herself to help the people. She gives herself to the earth and one part of her body becomes *ubi*, another becomes rice...it's a bit gory but folk tales are like that. I'd love to do a Sabahan motif to relate to the story. There are also two more 'Dina' books on the way, one on art class and another about Malaysia.

**Thank you very much for availing yourself to us, Emila. We wish you all the best in your coming endeavours.**