

‘Fight ableism, but do not overly celebrate mediocrity’: Wong Meng Ee

In this month’s Singapore Shelf, The Sunday Times looks at four local titles, from an anthology of horror stories to a groundbreaking collection of essays on how people can do better by those who are disabled



Clement Yong

In an essay published in a new anthology titled *Not Without Us: Perspectives On Disability And Inclusion In Singapore*, a wheelchair user baulks at being called an inspiration.

For taking public transport to work, he was seen as “heroic” by friends and colleagues.

“If I win a medal in the Para(Olympic) Games, then maybe I can be called an ‘inspiration’. But not for taking the bus to work,” he said.

His experience was highlighted in the piece titled *What Counts As Inclusivity?*, written by Institute of Policy Studies researcher Justin Lee.

It is a sentiment that recurs in this groundbreaking volume on disability published by Ethos Books.

Sharing editing duties are National Institute of Education (NIE) associate professor Wong Meng Ee, University of Sheffield professor Dan Goodley and Princeton University Fung global fellow Victor Zhuang.

While everyday activities for those with disabilities are markedly more difficult, being praised for simply living is patronising and humiliating.

“While fighting against ableism, we don’t want to overly celebrate

mediocrity,” says Prof Wong, who is visually disabled, and researches and teaches special education at NIE.

“We don’t want to pooh-pooh the idea of excellence. That is not the space we want to encourage when we talk about being inclusive.”

The first book of its kind to be published in Singapore, *Not Without Us* is about charting that inclusive space so it does not undermine, but rather expand, people’s idea of meritocracy in a way that empowers those who are disabled.

It brings together 20 essays by contributors including academics, activists, researchers and students who are disabled and abled.

The topics are wide-ranging – from debates about how the “correct” sign language in Singapore links to the politics of bilingualism to why Mediagroup’s English drama *Kin* (2018) is a major leap forward for disability representation in Singapore media.

The book’s title is a reference to “nothing about us without us”, a call for self-representation since the 1990s by the global disability rights movement.

Prof Wong, 52, says the book is a sign that more disabled individuals in Singapore are now willing to talk

about their experiences without feeling intimidated; and those who are abled are more accepting that they are connected to disability, either through a family member or someone they care deeply about.

“People have been more intentional about it, recognising and acknowledging the experiences of disabled people,” he adds.

“Hopefully, it becomes a more prominent and omnipresent topic, because disability studies may not be just about disability, but should be concurrent with all aspects of how we are living life and grow as a society.”

The community has sought to expand its scope, especially through critical disability studies, in which academics study disability in conjunction with other causes of marginalisation.

For many of the essay contributors, Prof Wong says, disability raised other questions of identity. “It could be a trigger of self-awareness about who he is, how things can be changed, why it matters and so forth.”

One of them, Ms Xie Yi Hui, is an immigrant from China who is partially deaf. She compares her attempts to play down her disability – sitting in centre-right positions in a group to hear out of her

left ear, or nod and start a new topic when she cannot hear clearly – to the way she modifies her other behaviours to fit in.

“There are so many parallels between the disabled experience and that of other marginalised groups, people who are discriminated against because of their country of origin, the colour of their skin, the prayers they recite and the people they love,” she writes.

“If someone says a disabled person is too normal, they disrespect this person’s disability. Marginalised groups tend to hide the marked parts of their identity and there is a painful but liberating process of ‘coming out.’”

There is also an essay by Ms Bella Choo, who interviews four mothers whose children have autism. They share their experiences of being judged as bad mothers in public when their kids, who do not have clear physical markers of disability, behave in ways outside the norm.

To avoid scrutiny, they make sure to leave their homes only when fewer people are out and about, including taking their child to the pool when it is raining.

Choo argues that social spaces can be a place where ideas about disability can be rehabilitated, and



National Institute of Education associate professor Wong Meng Ee (left), who is visually disabled, researches and teaches special education. He is the co-editor of a new book, *Not Without Us: Perspectives On Disability And Inclusion In Singapore* (above). PHOTO: ETHOS BOOKS

that caring for those with disabilities should not just be the responsibility of the mother or the family, but one borne by society as a whole.

Prof Wong says attitudes towards disability remain the hardest to shift. It is not easy or straightforward.

Even the terms used to refer to those with disabilities are debated, he notes, particularly within the disabled community – with some preferring the more “proper” use of “persons with disabilities” and others insisting on using “disabled

people” as a way of ridding the term of its stigma.

A chapter on the logistics of staging a disability-friendly play – which includes sign language interpretation, pre-show touch tours, the use of service dogs and visual guides to help in navigating the space – also shows how daunting the practice of inclusivity can be.

Even after a host of measures were put in place, organisers later had to improvise because they failed to plan for an audience member who was both deaf and blind. “This brings us back to the

awareness of disability, and how it is a conversation,” says Prof Wong. “We need to make sure solutions are not just a token response or because we have to check all the boxes on a list – a building needs this, this and this, then I have done my part for disability. It’s more than that.”

“Ultimately, it’s about how you treat people, how you interact with individuals, how you help people, not just providing structural accessibility. Hopefully, we can have that conversation a bit more intensively, more intimately, and

people get to know more disabled persons, and that knowledge becomes not just third-party but also first-hand.

“That would be the challenge of this book, seeking to change the mindsets of people that would not ordinarily be reached. Maybe this can be a seed-planting exercise.”

clementy@sph.com.sg

• *Not Without Us: Perspectives On Disability And Inclusion In Singapore* (\$27) is published by Ethos Books and is available at major bookstores.