

## A space to discover and experience books

A child who loses herself in a book finds a treasure more valuable than gold. Buried in the labyrinth of words and images are surprises, adventure, magic, friends and plots that lead to an everlasting love for reading.

Leading children into a story so that they become the characters in it or part of the action is what Jeanisha Wan wants to do at The Story Book, an event space for storybook-themed activities and events.

Wan, aka the story chief, founded and owns the newly opened space at Plaza Arkadia in Desa ParkCity, Kuala Lumpur. She hopes that whoever walks through its inviting red door — which looks like a book cover — will discover and experience stories, and not just read them.

"I want to change the way people perceive books by engaging all their senses. They can listen to a book being read aloud, watch a cartoon adaptation of it, take part in a drama workshop and act out scenes, or attend an event and mingle with its leading characters. Once they understand the story, they will be more interested to read the book," says Wan, whose own experience with stories makes good reading.

She grew up listening to her father's tale of how, in 1962, his trading vessel was shipwrecked on Pulau Akar in the South



Wan (with her red hood) hopes people will discover stories at her new book-themed space

China Sea that was inhabited by a single family. The crew were saved by another ship and upon returning to Singapore, Wan Choong Leong wrote about this modern-day Robinson Crusoe story in the *Nanfang Evening Post*.

On top of this real-life adventure, Wan and her three older sisters had their fill of stories nightly from Rediffusion, a radio service that started in London in 1928 and expanded to the then British colonies. The girls would act out the tales aired or talk about them endlessly among themselves. This avid interest in imagined worlds and lives eventually led them to books.

"Yes, we read a lot — Enid Blyton and all the classics, by authors like Dickens and Austen. My family was not well off, so I would spend a whole day in the bookstore, standing there and reading from cover to cover. That was how hungry I was for books.

"Dad encouraged us in storytelling and it became a habit. We used to write our own stories too. Mine were mostly inspirational. One of my sisters wrote dark stuff, like *Wuthering Heights*, and another, funny pieces on travel. From young, I would compile my stories and send them to the newspapers but they were never published."

Adulthood and career led the siblings

to different paths. Wan went into banking, then IT and public relations. She still runs her own PR company and says The Story Book complements what she does because clients now have a ready space for their corporate events. "The storytelling part helps me in my work because I like to articulate stuff and make a story out of it."

Visitors to her space have lots of opportunity to do that, as happened at the *Beauty and the Beast* storytelling event for children, and Reading *Romeo and Juliet* for adults. Wan hopes it will be a "home" to book lovers and writers, who can gather for readings, talks or workshops as they tuck into bites served by its food partners, or pick out recommended titles from Bookalicious!, a pop-up store at the premises. She plans to bring in more bookshop partners to cater to Chinese, Korean and Japanese readers.

"When we first opened, people would walk in and say, 'This is not a library ah? It's not a cafe?' The product is the same, but we want to change the way people consume books. Changing people's mindset is hard, but we have to start somewhere," says Wan, who can take heart from her current favourite book character, Frodo Baggins from *The Lord of the Rings*, a small hobbit with a big and seemingly impossible task.

— By Tan Gim Ean