

Write advice

To grow as a writer, one should not be shy about seeking feedback, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

At a literary festival, it is common for aspiring authors to listen to published authors and industry experts share their writing and publishing experiences. A common theme among all these aspiring authors is hope — hope that by listening to others speak, we'll not only be entertained but also gain some insight into the craft of writing. A writers' festival, however, is somewhat different.

As Alex Christofi, 27, a literary agent with Conville & Walsh, says: "At a writers' festival, you go to get insight into your own writing, and to start conversations between you and industry professionals, or other writers, about the business and craft of writing. It's also a good way to find others who are in a similar position to you. Writing is a pretty lonely profession so it's wonderful to talk to others who can really empathise."

Christofi was one of the participants at the recent Festival of Writing held in York, England. Thoroughly immersed in the publishing world, Christofi is a person who straddles both sides of the publishing industry. In addition to being an agent, he'll also have his first novel, *Glass*, published next month. He says: "I was always practicing my own writing, but at the same time, my company gave me the chance to take on my own clients, and I knew I would



A literary festival is designed more for readers, says **Wille**.

love to work with authors on their own writing."

Another participant at the writer's festival, Andrew Wille explains: "A literary festival is designed more for readers, while a writers' festival is for writers. Writers can usually attend a writers' festival at any point in their careers (likewise other events such as masterclasses, or writing retreats), but they should look at what is on offer and see if it speaks to them wherever they are in their writing right now. Even if you are a way from finishing your book, it can be good to line your instinct with the advice you hear."

THE BOOK DOCTOR

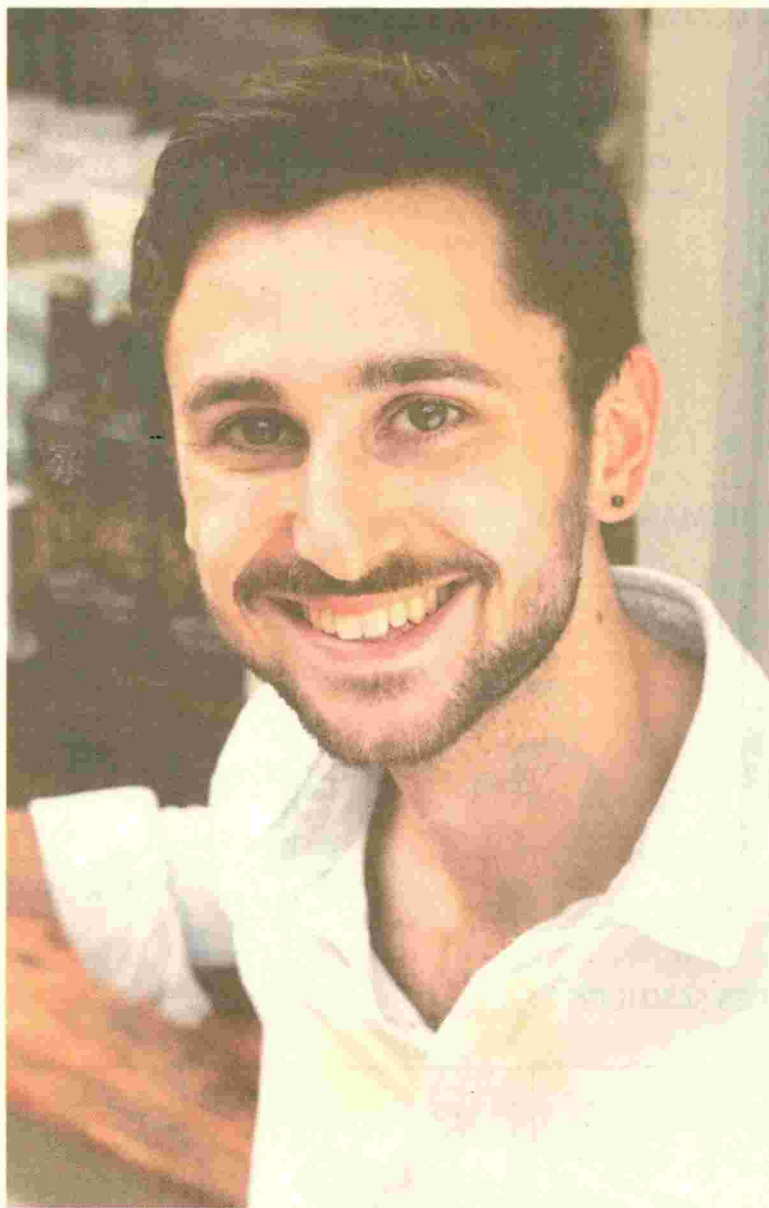
Of all the people who give advice on your writing at a writers' festival, one of the most curious is probably a person referred to as a "book doctor". Wille is one such person. He explains: "The one purpose I imagine all book doctors have in common is that of helping writers improve their work and then achieve their intended outcome, but I don't think there is a set description for what a book doctor does; each one brings his or her own experience to bear as a useful reader for a writer's work."

"Sometimes the ingredients of a super story are there in a manuscript or a synopsis, but the actual telling of the story lacks focus or spark, so I find myself suggesting ways to make it more enticing, e.g., through voice."

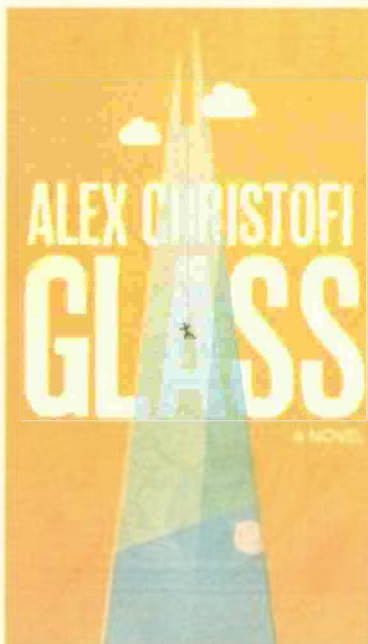
Adding, he says: "Sometimes I end up giving mini tutorials on aspects of craft such as point of view or prose style. A common flaw of many novels by inexperienced writers is perhaps that they try to do too much, and a book doctor can point out what might be sacrificed for other gains. There are often trade-offs in the writing, which are aesthetic choices as much as anything. A book doctor can point out strengths and weaknesses, and the writer can decide where to take the work next."

When helping a writer, Wille draws upon his expertise as an editor as well as his experience as a teacher, giving his own interpretation of a piece of writing then making editorial suggestions to make the writing stronger as well as more publishable.

He has worked in the publishing industry since 1987; he was a graduate trainee with the Maxwell Communication Corporation. He later became managing editor, then senior editor, at Little, Brown. He has also freelanced and done a MFA (Master of Fine Arts) programme in Writing and Poetics at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics



Christofi is both an agent and a novelist.



at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado and his own short stories have been published in literary journals.

Wille elaborates: "It's important to meet writers where they are, so that any feedback can also help them continue to grow as writers. Much also depends on what experience the writer already has in the field in which he or she is writing. I often find myself asking lots of questions relative to the writer's intention. These questions don't always have obvious answers, but are intended as points of departure."

A word of caution: "If you want to be published, get feedback on your work," says Wille. "But whether it comes from beta readers, workshops, or professional critiques, own the feedback you get on the writing, and bring it back to your own intention. Feedback can be various, and even contradictory, and it's up to you how to make sense of it. Listen, of course, but seek out a cross-section of views along the way, and don't rely on the views of any one editor or reader."

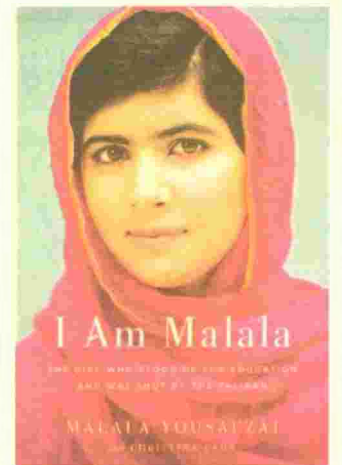
Even with all the strengths and weaknesses of a book pointed out, the road to publication isn't always smooth.

As a published author, Christofi advises that although he was initially sceptical about the criticism he received about his novel from an editor, as an agent, he knew the best authors were the ones who did a lot of editing.

Nonetheless, if it is your dream to be published, Christofi has some final words of comfort: "I know it can seem faceless when you send a book and receive a standard rejection slip, but publishing is not a conspiracy — it's just that we get sent a huge amount of material and we only have time to work with a few authors. It is definitely hard to get published, but agents and publishers are desperate to find a really good book. If you haven't found success yet, don't give up: make it so good that they can't say no."

More info at www.writersworkshops.co.uk

Bestseller



NON-FICTION

1. *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* by Malala Yousafzai
2. *Reclaim Your Heart* by Yasmin Mogahed
3. *Love Without Limits: A Remarkable Story of True Love Conquering All* by Nick Vujicic
4. *Guinness World Records 2015: Celebrating 60 Years (1955 - 2015)* by Guinness World Records
5. *Wreck This Journal: Everywhere* by Keri Smith

FICTION

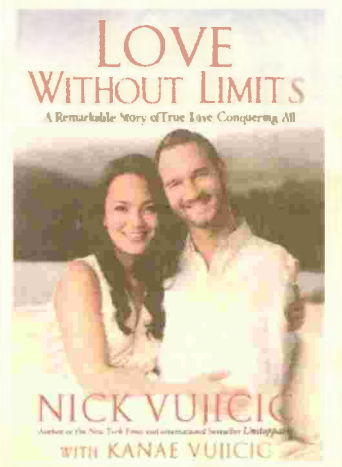
1. *Love, Rasle* by Cecelia Ahern
2. *Lullabies* by Lang Leav
3. *Cone Girl* by Gillian Flynn
4. *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien
5. *Horror Stories* by Tunku Halim

MALAY NOVELS

1. *Suamiku Paling Sweet* by Anjell
2. *Gelap* by Ariff Adly
3. *Raudhah* by Ramlee Awang Murshid
4. *Gantung* by Nadia Khan
5. *Suamiku Encik Sotong* by Syikin Zainal

MALAY GENERAL BOOKS

1. *Catatan Matluthfi* by Matluthfi
2. *Diagnosis* by Dr Anwar Fazal, Dr. Azzat & Dr. Azah
3. *Deme 'Wasap' Ambe Reply* by Ustaz Azhar Idrus
4. *Dracula Vs Al-Fateh* by Muhd Nur Iman Ramli
5. *Cukup Hanya Allah* by Ustaz Kazim Elias



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