



The autograph session for New Zealand-based author Chloe Gong (left) had to be extended.

The Southeast Asian Cyberpunk Dream panel featured (from far left) game studio founder Mark Fillon, horror author Cassandra Khaw (on screen), comic book artist Ario Anindito and moderator Michelle Tanmizi. PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE, ARTS HOUSE LIMITED

Chloe Gong and South-east Asian cyberpunk are hits

Charmaine Lim

New York Times best-selling author Chloe Gong and a cyberpunk panel were hits at the Singapore Writers Festival's opening weekend, while two panels on historical fiction and relationships with cities meandered and lost audience attention.

Gong saw a full house at The Arts House last Saturday, where she shared how she balanced university and writing, as well as familial influences in her books. "Writing, to me, has always been this reprieve from studying, from life in general. It is this thing that gives me a lot of joy, that in a day where I'm really tired, writing makes me less tired."

The 24-year-old New Zealand-based author spoke of her Shanghaiese roots and why she set her debut duology, *These Violent Delights* and *Our Violent Ends*, in 1920s Shanghai. Her love of the era

was inherited from her parents, and her work transplants the classic Romeo and Juliet story to a city and period seldom seen in historical fantasy.

Her hour-long signing, extended from 30 minutes, had fans lining up out the doors of the venue. Despite time constraints, the author took time to talk to each fan, sign multiple books and take pictures.

A Southeast Asian Cyberpunk Dream panel on Friday offered food for thought as panellists dived into the exotification and appropriation of Asian cultures and languages in Western cyberpunk media.

The session featured Mark Fillon, the Filipino founder of General Interactive game studio, and Indonesian comic book artist Ario Anindito, while Malaysian horror author Cassandra Khaw joined via Zoom.

The trio addressed the problematic issue of how, while the Asian influence has always been prominent in the genre, there are few Asian voices, much less South-east

Asian ones. South-east Asia is a region ripe for cyberpunk settings and storytelling, and the panellists agreed that it is time for regional writers to tell their own stories.

Fillon cited, as an example, *Chinatown Detective Agency*, a game released by General Interactive in April, which is set in a dystopic Singapore in the year 2037.

Khaw wrapped up the session declaring: "We've always been ready for it. It is time, it has always been time."

Two other panels on Saturday proved a little less rousing, with a student spotted nodding off during *A Historical State Of Mind*. Irish author Audrey Magee was joined by Singaporean writers Josephine Chia and Warran Kalasegaran in a discussion about writing historical fiction.

Aside from plenty of research, finding the right story to set within the time period was important. The genre is a unique space in which varied ideas and perspectives can be explored through characters within a set timeline of events.

If *I Love You Was A Promise: Our Relationship With Cities* also struggled to find its footing as Shivram Gopinath, Akshita Nanda, Constance Singam and Sheba Karim shared their love-hate relationships with cities.

The session came together in the second half when writers gave opinions on who gets to tell the story of a city and its people.