



## Snapshot

It's official – The Material Girl ages in reverse. Even when standing between much younger actresses Andrea Riseborough (left) and Abbie Cornish, 53-year-old pop star, actress and director Madonna looks youthful and vibrant, with the same perfect glowing skin and dazzling smile that she's known for. She was seen in a custom baby-blue Vionnet gown with red appliqué butterflies – along with what looks like almost bare skin – at the premiere of her movie *WE*, which debuted at the 68th Venice Film Festival.

Her fourth attempt at directing, *WE* simultaneously tells the story of King Edward VIII's abdication of the British throne for the sake of his American lover, Wallis Simpson, and a modern counter-story starring Cornish as a New Yorker obsessed with Simpson. The UK's *Telegraph* said that the movie was "rather better than expected; it's bold, confident and not without amusing moments. Still, it's undeniably a strange concoction." *WE* is scheduled to open in select theatres across the US in December.

# People & Places

newsmakers, trends & hotspots BY Anandhi Gopinath



## Book it

The founders of BookXcess reveal how their business is based on a simple dream – that more Malaysians fall in love with reading.

According to Andrew Yap, the co-founder of local bookstore BookXcess, no matter how popular e-books and digital readers become in the near future, they are not going to be a threat, simply because nothing will ever replace the sheer joy of physically reading a book. The woody scent tucked between the pages and the grainy feel of the paper on your fingers is a source of unmatched bliss, and with all due respect to e-book developers, is something that can never quite be replicated.

However, credit must be paid when it's due – e-books and e-readers are responsible for getting a whole new generation of gadget-crazy people to begin reading, many of whom may have never been motivated to pick up a book before. The real threats to traditional bookshops are sellers like Amazon.com and Bookdepository.co.uk, who can provide a huge selection of titles for a fraction of their normal price.

So, BookXcess solved that problem by offering exactly the same thing. Yap and his business partner Jacqueline Ng – also his wife – are behind BookXcess, a bookshop famous for selling new books and unusual titles for almost incomprehensibly low prices. BookXcess is based on a simple dream that the immensely likeable couple share – that more Malaysians start reading and fall in love with it.



SUHAIMI YUSUF/THE EDGE

But first, how are their books as affordable as they are?

"The books we sell are brand new, they are not old or second hand," Yap explains. "We are in what is called the remainder-book industry. They are print overruns – when the printers make too many – and also books that have outlived their shelf life in normal bookshops. They are then sold at a discounted rate to people like us, so we can sell them for a low price as well. What we don't do is sell new releases, so if you want a book that just came out we may not carry it."

Yap and Ng began BookXcess as a small, 500 sq ft bookstore back in 2006 just to test the market. Within

six months, the couple found that the idea was very successful, and customer feedback – which was always positive – also helped them work out what stock to acquire. "No one person can read everything, so I would rely on our customer's feedback as to what books were good to buy and which authors to look out for. Many of them are extremely well-read, so their input was invaluable," Ng says.

Soon enough, BookXcess moved to a larger space, and then continuous growth and expansion led to their current 12,000 sq ft shoplot. Conveniently laid out and easily navigable, the new store is spacious and inviting, and even includes stools

Ng and Yap are determined to keep the prices of their books affordable

in appropriate locations for leisurely browsing. The stock is arranged in the same way most other bookshops are laid out, with a dedicated section for back-issue magazines as well.

Its location in Amcorp Mall, a suburban, family-style mall in the heart of Petaling Jaya, is the perfect fit. "We initially chose this place because the rent was cheap, which meant we could keep our costs low and therefore keep the books affordable," Yap says. "Just because the books are cheap we didn't want to force people to shop in a hot, sticky warehouse so we wanted to ensure we had a nice, air-conditioned shop, easily accessed and with plenty of parking. At that time, Amcorp Mall fit the bill perfectly. And it still does. We also like that there are two other bookshops here – the second-hand bookshop and a book-rental place – as it serves a larger section of the market. As far as we're concerned, the more people who read the better."

While there was a huge opportunity with BookXcess for Yap and Ng to charge a premium price and benefit on the huge returns, they decided instead to keep the prices of the books surprisingly low just to ensure more people can afford to buy them.

"I don't come from a rich family, and when we were young I remember that books were too expensive to buy so I read more magazines. Even today, books aren't cheap – RM65 is a lot of money for a lot of people. Most of our books are much cheaper than that, so anyone can walk out of here with something to read," Yap says.

"And also, people who don't have the habit of reading may see RM65 as a very big investment into something new – makes sense lah, why would you spend money on something you don't even know you will enjoy," Ng adds. "Here, they don't spend too much, and because they enjoy it they keep coming back and they can afford to buy more books."

This desire to keep people reading

## A naked retreat

The beauty and tranquillity of a hilltop forest reserve, the fantasy and fun of horse stables and the comfort of a fully-accredited environmentally friendly resort make the naked Stables Private Reserve a holiday destination unlike any other in the world. This new resort is located in Moganshan, a picturesque mountain hamlet in Zhejiang Province, China, that is two and a half hours from the vibrant city of Shanghai.

The resort is the brainchild of China-based eco-resort pioneers, naked Retreats. A vital part of the "naked philosophy" is designing,

building and operating its own resorts to achieve a "Triple Bottom Line" of environmental, social and economic sustainability.

As such, the resort, as well as its 112 free-standing treetop villas and earth huts, are constructed using industry-leading sustainable materials. It is aiming to become one of the first resorts in Asia to achieve the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environment Design) Platinum certification, using both cutting-edge construction technology and local traditional construction methods such as mudwalls, bamboo structures and stone masonry.

The uber-luxurious living spaces – equipped with top-of-the-range

AV facilities and exclusive amenities – are complemented by a wide range of dining facilities. Choose between the 80-seat Afro-Asian restaurant, Kikaboni (meaning "organic" in Swahili), The Clubhouse Cafe and a poolbar and bistro.

Recreation options include a 750 sq m spa and private horse stables. The resort's fully equipped equestrian centre boasts stables for 20 horses, an equestrian field and mountain riding trails. Three outdoor swimming pools, including two heated pools for the winter months, mountain biking, hiking paths and an organic farm offer a broad range of opportunities to enjoy the magnificent natural environment, local wildlife and fresh mountain air.



A view of the resort and its rooms

is also why BookXcess organises an annual book fair called The Big Bad Wolf, which provides additional discounts on all titles, where books can go for as low as RM8 a copy. When they began the fair back in 2009, they shipped in 120,000 books to be sold – this year, it's a whopping 1.5 million books that are up for sale. OCBC Bank has come on as the official sponsor, and all its cardholders get an additional discount on their purchases.

The couple say it is set to be the biggest book sale in the world thus far, and they are in talks with the Guinness World Records to get the event listed. "We came up with the idea of The Big Bad Wolf sale for two reasons – firstly, to raise awareness of BookXcess and what we do. Secondly, because Malaysians need to start reading, and affordable books will help them do this," Yap says.

Currently, Yap and Ng have no plans to open other branches of BookXcess, although requests have come in from several shopping centres. "The service that people get at BookXcess is very important – just because our books are cheap doesn't mean you don't get the best possible customer service. We only hire people who read and who are interested in inspiring others, and that's not easy to find," Ng says.

Getting into a franchise agreement is also tricky, Yap admits, unless the franchisee agrees totally with their business model and operation style. "Margins must remain low because cost of books have to be low – only a person inspired by reading will ever do that. How many businesspeople are willing to give up their margins? I guess if we find someone who thinks like us, we will consider a franchise agreement, but we are very strict about not compromising the price and quality of the books we sell for making an extra buck for ourselves. That is not what we're here for."

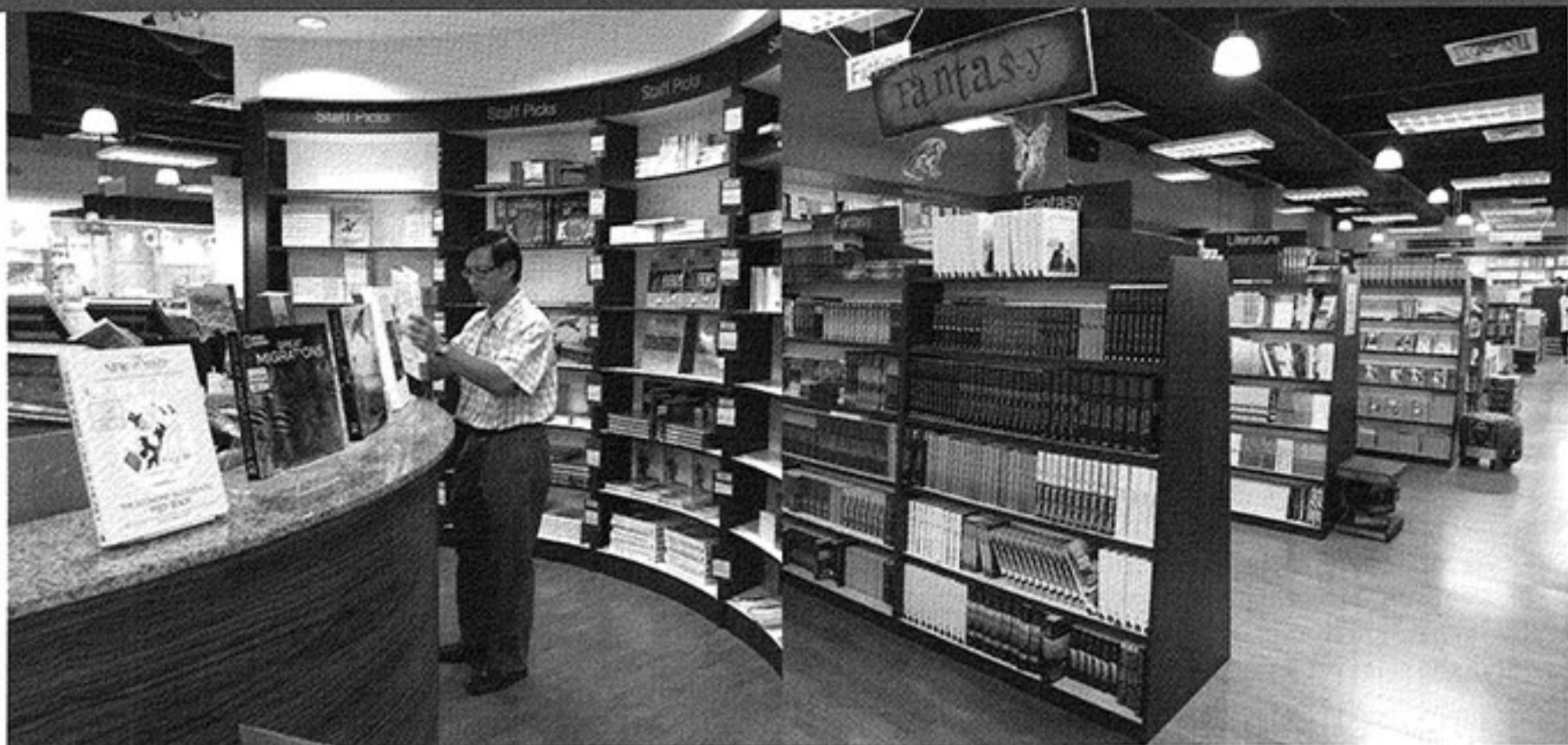
This incredibly likable couple aren't just talking the talk, but actually walking it as well. In order to encourage people to buy books as presents, BookXcess even provides free gift-wrapping services for any book that you choose. "Even if the book is RM1, we will wrap it for free, and all our wrappers are from local stationery specialists a.e.i.o.u Studio, so they are of high quality. Sometimes, the wrapping paper may cost more than the books," Ng quips.

"Everything we do is about getting people to read," Yap says. "That is what drives us, and what drives BookXcess as well. It brings us so much joy, and we want to inspire others in the same way too." ■

The Big Bad Wolf sale will be held from Oct 7 to 16 at Malaysia Agro Exposition Park in Serdang. For a detailed map and a full list of books on sale, visit [www.bigbadwolfbooks.com](http://www.bigbadwolfbooks.com). For more information on BookXcess, visit [www.bookxcess.com](http://www.bookxcess.com).

As part of the resort's commitment to support its surrounding communities, the naked Galleries offer unique insights into the main livelihood of the region, bamboo farming, plus naked Stables' wide-ranging environmental projects in collaboration with local farmers. A centrally located amphitheatre will host concerts and cultural performances, and guests are encouraged to learn about the many arts and crafts that are indigenous to Moganshan.

Visit [www.nakedretreats.cn](http://www.nakedretreats.cn) for more information on this unusual resort and its sister property, naked Home Village – eight hillside village homesteads that have been transformed into rustic-chic getaways that are models of environmental sustainability and community cooperation.



The conveniently laid out interior of BookXcess in Amcorp Mall

Aldo Gucci, Roma, 1955

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