

Guest Speakers: Nishi Kanako, Anusorn Tipayanon and Uthis Haemamool

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Creative Rebels? Don't try to fit *Anusorn Tipayanon*, *Uthis Haemamool* or *Nishi Kanako* into any kind of box. Working across many forms, these three artists are among the leading creative spirits in modern Thailand and Japan. Learn about their inspirations and how experimentation keeps their work vibrant and fresh. In conversation with *Sine Intira Charoenpura*.

[BEYOND WRITING: SELF-EXPRESSION THROUGH OTHER MEDIUMS]



Inthira Charoenpura (hereinafter Charoenpura): For Nishi-san, aside from writing, do you also explore through other mediums? For instance, Uthis Haemamool has his art while Anusorn Tipayanon also specialises in food.

Kanako Nishi (hereinafter Nishi): Sawasdee ka. Aside from writing novels, I also draw, and many of my novel cover illustrations are from the drawings that I drew. Those drawings have also been shown in an exhibition. Aside from that, there are also three other picture books.

Charoenpura: How do you determine the medium for each story? For instance, how do you know that you want to tell this story using words, or this one through paintings and another through food or sketches?



Nishi: For me, the novel-form is like my primary medium for presenting my stories and my thoughts. Following that would be visual—through art. Just now, the artwork shown is from the novel cover of *i(Ai)*, which can either mean 'I' (myself) or 'ai', which means love in Japanese. The artwork, which was used for the novel and the exhibition, are related to the sea. That is because, at the end of the book, the protagonist jumps into the sea so he can be reincarnated and reborn. Hence, when I was

organising for the exhibition at the gallery, it occurred to me that I should paint this sea that is related to the cover, and arranged it as a 360° display so that the visitors will feel as if they are under the sea and inside a human's body to evoke that sense of being reborn.

Charoenpura: Paintings and writings have a strong connection with each other. As for Uthis (Uthis Haemamool), you also work with paintings as well, but your paintings are not of the same genre—if one may say so. Perhaps I am missing something. Perhaps there is a secret connection between the characters in your literature and paintings?

Uthis Haemamool (hereinafter Haemamool): Well, right from the beginning, I came from an art background in that I studied visual art at university. However, since I started writing, I have not gone back to doing art until recently with my latest novel, *Rang Khong Pratthana* (Silhouette of Desire). It was like I have been seeking for my potential—pushing myself and finding out how I can wish to push the boundaries of this literature to new realms.

Charoenpura: Firstly, it is important to note that *Silhouette of Desire* is very experimental, including the format and design of the book itself. However, what is the real reason for such specific designs and style?

Haemamool: It came from a feeling that we are living in a time where all types of art are interconnected to each other, and so I wanted to explore how far I can take literature and merge it with other forms of art using the abilities or skills that I had before I started writing.

Charoenpura: Because you studied art?

Haemamool: That is right. It also ties into the questions I had about art itself, as well as the themes explored in the novel. Hence, I went back to painting because of the character in the novel. He's a character who tells his story through paintings. The concept also translates into the novel's typography and the illustrations. The paintings are quite explicit, rather erotic, and thus we won't be projecting it up onto the screen here. [laughs]

Charoenpura: In that case, one must admit that Nishi-san's paintings are much more easy on the eyes. [chuckles]

Artch Bunnag (hereinafter Bunnag): Nishi-san said she would like to see it. [laughs]

Charoenpura: I would love to see it as well. Uthis has also held an exhibition featuring a nude life drawing workshop. What was the reason behind that decision?

Haemamool: I wanted to understand the mainstream sentiments on nudity and these social taboos. If you look at it from a moral perspective or appropriateness, the majority would agree that these things are not to be spoken of—something to be kept only in one's private life. But if we can use art to come to an understanding and make people understand that it can be viewed from non-erotic way, or through a different eye—

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] As in not crass, or dirty.

Haemamool: Exactly. When we see someone in the nude, oftentimes the first reactions we feel are disapproval and rejection. You'd feel, 'why on earth would you take off your clothes?'. However, that initial feeling of rejection may be shutting the doors to our opportunity to learn. It's like seeing the beauty and wonders of human anatomy through a different lens. Rather than seeing a naked body from a moral point of view, once you see that from a different perspective, it can inspire you in ways beyond what we often perceive as vulgar.

[WRITING, SELF-PRESERVATION, AND AN ALTERNATIVE PASSION]

Charoenpura: As for Anusorn, regarding being a food activist, it seems that our talk today feels like going back to our natural, primaevial elements. For Uthis, it's going back to the naked state or the primitive form, while Nishi-san connects to nature through the sea, and then there's you with food. So why food? There has been a recent debate, which many may have heard of, regarding Thai food. Apparently, there is Thai food, proper Thai, and more authentic Thai—not to mention claims of home-cooked Thai food. So I was wondering whether your writings come from a particular question or discussions such as this?



Anusorn Tipayanon (hereinafter Tipayanon):

Actually, these sorts of questions and rhetoric do not really matter. When it comes down to food, there's authentic Thai, non-traditional Thai and even non-Thai—but we eat them nevertheless. In fact, you may say that it's not art in a similar sense to these two (Nishi and Haemamool). Cooking and food are like a hobby. When I was writing, I also had another occupation of being a professor, and actually, these two professions are very isolated—self-contained,

even. I would write, and then once I finished, I moved on to prepare for my lectures. Everything was carried out at the same table, and the only thing that changed was the activity and the materials used—from references for my short stories and novels to the papers needed for the lecture. Year after year, this continued until I started feeling that I have been solely immersed in very self-contained activities. I'd follow the routine, go to bed, and the next morning—

Haemamool: [Crosstalk] As in, go to bed with someone?

Charoenpura: As in resting! After you work you go to rest!

Tipayanon: I see artists who work with erotic subjects always read too much between the lines. They always interpret things. [laughs] So yes, I started feeling that I barely get to interact with people. Secondly, my health was deteriorating. You see, when writing—though I don't drink beer like Uthis—I had lots of coffee and smoking, which really affects your body. So I thought of this book by Murakami—many people would have heard of him—many probably love his novels, but the book which really had its effects on me was the one which he talks about running (*What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*). It's like, if you want to keep writing, you have to have the

strength to do it. You can't just be burning yourself inside with coffee, beer and other things as your way of resting. You've got to have a healthier alternative.

However, I realised my knees probably wouldn't take running well, so I started thinking about what I enjoy doing. Turns out, I realised I enjoy cooking. It was something that I enjoyed while I was living in London. I didn't feel bored when I was working for eight hours straight in the kitchen. I felt that getting to move around and meeting new people. So I asked myself, 'should I get back to cooking?', like that.

Charoenpura: It felt like you were getting good energy from doing it?

Tipayanon: Yes. So I decided to quit 'not cooking'. Actually, before that, I was talking to my junior during an interview with *Salmon*. I thought about creating work for other people to enjoy. My junior likes drinking beer like Uthis here, so he asked if I wanted to make craft beer with him. But I thought I couldn't do it, and we discussed whether I could do something else—like craft food, instead. After our discussion that night, I came back and thought about what I could make as 'craft food', or food that requires time and attention to create—for instance, soy sauce or fermented things. There's one key fermented dish in Thai food, which is *pla daek* or *pla raa* (Thai anchovies). I felt that if I tried making *pla daek*, it would take me to places which I'm unfamiliar with because I would have to travel to *Isaan* (Northeastern region of Thailand), and I would get to connect with nature, being out in the sun and the wind.

Charoenpura: You do look much healthier. [To Haemamool] You see?

Tipayanon: [To Haemamool] Don't just drink beer! [laughs] Nowadays, there's a trend for sustainability where people start doing small farms of their own, but I wasn't following that trend. Mine was more like, 'I don't want to be holed up in a room writing, I want to meet people', and so I left and headed to the countryside. My daily life was basically this: riding a motorbike around and talking to the locals about how they make *pla daek*, where they catch the fish etc. I also tried fermenting them myself, some worked, some didn't come out quite right, and some that I gave out to my neighbours. So then people started to wonder what I was doing, and they started talking to me. That was how I got to join the locals when they cook.

With food being a current trend, many chefs want to have a chat with me to ask 'why am I doing this?' or 'what I see in food?', questions like that. I told them that when I started cooking, I realised that the food that we eat nowadays, almost 90% comes from the big corporations. There was a fascinating conversation I had with a mother who lives in the countryside. She said, 'it's not hard raising a kid nowadays, just put money in their hands and tell them to walk to Seven Eleven'. I was somewhat taken aback. When a child cries, just give it money to buy something from a convenience store. In the end, only the older generation will be the ones who still go to community markets. And the things they say there, don't call them organic vegetables or any of that because it's just what they grow and pick up to sell themselves.

Charoenpura: You don't want to romanticise it, that sense of sustainable economy and community.

Tipayanon: I wanted to escape a world where I could only stay with books. I felt that I wanted to meet people, to get to talk to them, and that's why I did what I did. After meeting the chefs, other activities then started to follow. Combined with my interest in researching, they told me that they were going to host a workshop on food, and could I give a talk about the history of fish sauce, or the history of *pla daek*, or whether I could do some research on that? It helped me understand people more, and that's reflected in my writing. I started seeing that humans are designed to eat. Like I always say, the two things that are important to humans are '*akart and aharn*' (translated to air and food, respectively). If you don't breathe, you suffer, and if you don't eat, you also suffer. But what are you eating nowadays? Think about it. Very few people cook and very few who would go to the supermarket to buy groceries to cook at home.

Charoenpura: We just buy ready-cooked meals and microwave them.

Tipayanon: Yes, we buy pre-made meals. [To Charoenpura] You own a restaurant so it would be easy for you to understand this. It's as if, in the end, when we talk about capabilities—one of the skills that we are losing rapidly and drastically is the ability to cook a meal for ourselves. But it's bizarre—

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] Some people say that it's a huge fuss because you need a stove etc.

Tipayanon: But it's strange because we work so hard to gain other skills and features. Say, we want to have a six-pack, and because of that, we waste our time going to the gym. On the other hand, with locals in the countryside, when it's dusk and dawn, they could tell whether it's the morning or the evening when you see the smoke coming up from the kitchen. When you're in the countryside, you can see the smoke straight away when you wake up around 4 or 5 a.m. in the morning. It was there that I felt that life was just right—writing and doing things that are beneficial to the community.

Charoenpura: Not sure if anyone here is friends with Anusorn on Facebook, but if you read his status about riding a bike or taking the motorbike to get a beer you'd find it a delightful read. It's a different type of story, where the storyteller is having fun, and the reader also enjoys it. And with what you've been doing, did you hope it would create a ripple of some sort in society?

Tipayanon: Yes, yes. I thought that partly, a society that can move forward with healthily needs to have a stable (food) resource. This means that if people nowadays—you see many rising chefs and many of them trying to be more vocal about food, you see food columns everywhere—there needs to be one person who helps push forward things about food history and food culture. Why do we look down on *pla daek* as something low when cheese also has an equally pungent smell? People enjoy having cheese and wine at parties without feeling put off by the smell of cheese, even though they're both fermented. I think these things sprung from a conscious or a specific perception that we have towards different food. If writers were to focus on this, it would be good

if we can use our words to help change the perception of people through food. My latest book, too, also follows this concept.

[THE WRITER'S ROLE AND THE FUTURE OF LITERATURE]

Charoenpura: Using what you're already doing but combining them with new methods. As for Khun¹ Nishi, aside from the drawings that appeared in your novels, what kind of impact do you think your works have created? For instance, for these two (Haemamool and Tipayanon), the first wants to breakdown moral boundaries [laughs] while the other wants to create a new concept of perception towards local food. What ideas does Khun Nishi have that you may wish to communicate through different mediums aside from words?

Nishi: I don't have the skills like these two. The powers that I have are limited in the sense that I can only write novels and draw for myself, and that is the full limit already of what I can do. However, just now, when Anusorn spoke about food, it reminded me of an event. In Japan, they like to hold a special occasion where two writers discuss and write a column or host a talk show together. And during the symposium with Israeli author, Edgar Keret, we thought that the people who enjoy literature would be those who have received higher education. Turns out, it may sound difficult and the word 'literature' might become highbrow,

On the contrary, the clips we see on Youtube or in games would become something adaptable like fast food, like burgers, because they are tasty and easy to consume. Though these are viewed as junk, people will still consume them because they are delicious. Metaphorically, novels and literature would be comparable to vegetables, while games and such are like burgers. Novels and literature are like vegetables—something that is beneficial but one that not many wants to consume because they're not as delicious, and that burgers are preferable because they are cheap and tasty with lots of fat. Thus, it's a shame that people view literature as something difficult, even though when you look at literary works and their culture, there are beneficial things—things that link to Pop culture and mainstream—that can be delicious enjoyed, or those that have nutritious value.



On the other hand, there are also things without any nutritious values but can also be deliciously enjoyed by everyone just like YouTube clips or games. That's why I'm more active on media channels so I can act as a voice that tells people that literature is not something highbrow, immortal and unreachable, but that there are works which appeal to Pop culture—easy and

¹ The word 'khun' in Thai is an honorific title equivalent to 'san' (さん) in Japanese.

delicious to consume while being easy to understand. That literature is not something too unreachable.

Charoenpura: As a writer from Japan, whose country has a much stronger reading culture than Thailand, she is still concerned. What about Thailand? It seems even bleaker. Is that part of the reason, Anusorn? That writing alone is not enough, and that we have to communicate through other means? For instance, with Uthis, his work has also been translated into Japanese.



Haemamool: Let me try answering this first. [To Tipayanon] Then you can go after me so that you have time to think about it. What you asked is very interesting, because if you study the working process in someone's life, it consists of many things. Naturally, for me, it's not just about how much I can step beyond the boundaries of art. Even in my own life, we have to cultivate it and look after our lives. Being someone who also pays attention to my physical health as well, doing art provides two benefits—both in terms of

physical health and mental health. When I work with literature, I personally invest a lot of energy—how do you say it—I use too much energy when working.

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] Obsessed?

Haemamool: It's a different energy to when you are drawing. Simply speaking, writing is like you're squeezing yourself and you can't make a mistake, but painting provides room for errors.

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] More chilled. Free-er. You don't pressure yourself.

Haemamool: You can make mistakes. Everything—your life will be fine. The world's not going to end. Your life won't break apart because the working process of art feels like it provides a space for failure.

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] It's like you're doing it to communicate with yourself?

Haemamool: I mean it also answers that. The truth is, every activity that occurs in our life, it provides an answer to oneself first before it is published or told to others. And relatively speaking, I must say that painting sells more than books. [laughs] Just like you ask—how should I put it? It helps to take care of our financial wellbeing better.

Charoenpura: Like we can tend to our mental and physical wellbeing with money. We're not going to deny that.

Haemamool: Yes. With books, I think the definite number of my readers would be around 1,500 people.

Charoenpura: Ah, because you also have your own publishing house.

Haemamool: Yes, so I know that my books will be able to sell to these 1,500 people. Now that is much different than before where it used to be around 2,000 to 2,500. And it's also very different to when my novel received the award², that reached 50,000 to 60,000 copies. So every time I release a new book, I only hope for the sales amount of 500 copies. [laughs]

Charoenpura: One requires a lot of strength but nourishes the soul, while the other doesn't require a lot of energy but can actually sustain you, like that?

Haemamool: Using a lot of energy to write a book and spending a year to complete it—what you get back from selling 500 copies of your book—you cannot live on that income, you can't use that money to sustain yourself for three months, let alone a year. You only get, say, 50,000 baht from those 500 books. It's impossible to live on that. You have to rely on other things too. So with art and me returning to art, there are collectors old and new who are interested in keeping my work. If I can sell one painting, that equals to—

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] You can plan your finances with much more ease.

Haemamool: Correct. So it's about managing your life. In order to live healthily with a sharp mind so that other people can read your work, you have to make sure you are taking care of yourself well to produce work. It's like what Anusorn said just now. You can't neglect your body and health because then, in the end, you will collapse. You can quickly deteriorate, just like that.

[THE WRITER'S VOICE THROUGH OTHER CHARACTERS]

Charoenpura: As for Anusorn, your scope of work also expands beyond just two as you also act as well?

Tipayanon: No. [laughs]

Charoenpura: How can you say no? We're in the same industry. [laughs]

Tipayanon: It's not like that. That's not a profession. Once in a while, my students or an acquaintance would ask me to help out.

² *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi* by Uthis Haemamool was awarded The South East Asian Writers Awards (S.E.A. Write Awards) in 2009.

Charoenpura: But if you didn't think it was fun, you could've said no. But I want to know what joy or fun do you see in acting? Like when you do fieldwork about food, you have fun doing that, and you find it intriguing and worth telling. Is there anything of that sort in terms of acting?

Tipayanon: Not really. I mean with acting, you might be able to imagine—when we're writing, we are the ones directing our characters' actions. So I wanted to try becoming someone else's character and see what it's like to speak as another character that we didn't create ourselves. That's it—I don't do that much.

Charoenpura: Don't be shy. You are also on set pretty often. [laughs] It does provide you with a different experience.

Tipayanon: It does. Although sometimes I get roles like being a father with a daughter in two films in a row, and one wonders what the character feels because I've never had a child before. So through these roles, I get to know what it's like to be dropping off and picking up my kid or having conflicts with them.



Charoenpura: Have you ever thought about digging up and writing about the media industry?

Tipayanon: No. [laughs] I respect you in that sense. I was exhausted being on set for just two days, meeting at 6 a.m. and then having all those spotlights glaring on you—my gosh. I think it's not an easy job. [To Charoenpura] You are the real professional. I can't do it all the time. Just three or four days is enough for me.

Charoenpura: It's fun at first. But then—

Tipayanon: [Crosstalk] Yes, but during those hours waiting during the filming, you wonder what you could do. You can't read because you cannot concentrate. I wouldn't say I am fond of those moments. I think during filming, there is so much time that goes to waste.

Charoenpura: Very much, indeed.

Tipayanon: So that's why I respect actors and actresses such as you.

Charoenpura: Thank you. Actually, I want to ask Khun Nishi too. When you write, you are writing as a woman, but at the same time, you are telling the story through a male's, or even other LGBT genders', perspective. Hearing your voice through your characters, do you feel the same way as when Anusorn takes on a role? As if you are searching for yourself within another layer of yourself.



Nishi: After hearing what you said, I think it can be concluded that novel writers are extremely wayward individuals. What I mean by that, for example, the white shirt that you [Charoenpura] are wearing, I also have a white shirt with the same design. However, your reason for choosing the shirt may be different from mine. If I were to choose, the design would be my main reason for choosing it. Say, if one single button is different from the rest of the buttons—that is also a way which the designer expresses his or her identity.

However, writers are more self-assertive than that, because a writer's way of expressing their identity is in the entire novel. You can portray every single drop of yourself right from the title of the novel through to the cover design, the plot, the characters—the writers can choose to do as they please. It shows that writers are rather wayward people who decide everything based on themselves. Writers have a high sense of self-identity and are very self-centred in their methods of working.

When using a character to tell the story through a first person's point of view, if it's for longer pieces, I tend to use a male protagonist. We may now live in a gender-free world where one doesn't have to define oneself as either male or female. However, in truth, there is a difference in a man's and a woman's state of being. As a female writer, whenever I write as a male, I have to see things through a man's eye.

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] You have to tell the story realistically.

Nishi: But at the same time, I would base it off my true feelings and place my own thoughts into that male character. However, it's also about how one transforms these values from a female into a male. That is something that makes my work fun.

Haemamool: Please allow me to take the role of an MC. Let me ask you [Charoenpura]. You are also someone who works across different disciplines—you're an actress, a writer, and I heard that you also sell clothes.

Charoenpura: [laughs] Yes, I'm quite fluid.

Haemamool: Then let us ask you as well. Tell us about your effort in adapting your life to do what you do here, and also how you do it well.

Charoenpura: To be honest, being an actress does help. First of all, financially, I can support myself. That's one thing. And another thing is that I don't know if I should consider myself lucky or unlucky, but I often get roles that would be impossible to encounter in real life—for instance, being a ghost. When you read an interview with actors, some would do their homework by studying the lives of people for the roles they get, but in my case, I can't do that.



Haemamool: Or like a nun.

Charoenpura: Yes, a nun, or a prostitute or a drug dealer. There was also a warrior princess. You can't do life studies on that, and everything has to come from your imagination. They're imaginary characters, and even the people who wrote these characters are out of their depth when it comes to interpreting these characters—how should this ghost be portrayed? It's just a ghost. So that void you have, it's my job to fill that in. And this is great when we feel that we have the freedom to do anything with our given role. You're confined to do what the other actors or actresses do. Many may think that it's straining to become someone you are not, but I like not having to be myself at all.

For me, that space for self-expression lies in writing and other mediums. For instance, when I read your [Haemamool] book, I don't know what the book is trying to say, but there's this one sentence that touched me. Or even Anusorn's books, I have written about it because of just one sentence. Here, I am both a reader and a writer at the same time. Appreciating literature, whether you are an actress or a writer, of course, you are still you—but you have the space to express yourself because it doesn't confine you too much. Hence, I feel that these things are comfortable and spiritually nourishing for me. It doesn't grind you too much. I try to balance these three parts [reader, writer, performer] as best as I can, but when you get to a certain point when I was sick and had depression—how would you say it—my awareness of the self through the roles and the books were utterly changed.

Haemamool: It becomes a bit hazy?

Charoenpura: Right. It was like you become uncertain of whether this is real, or whether that is more real. Am I experiencing this through my true self, or is it through the lens of depression? Things like that. From a writer's point of view, it's fascinating. Like, is this real, or is it not? I want to write as much as I can from this position while I'm experiencing this because I feel it would be a waste. I see myself as a lab rat here. [laughs] I feel like I would regret it if one day I am cured, and I don't get to experience those moments ever again.

Haemamool: Those phases you experienced?

Charoenpura: Yes. Moments I've experienced that inspired these possibly negative creativities. I feel that, since I have depression anyway, I shouldn't just let it pass. So in my recent works, whether in writing or acting, they become more reflected by my daily life. Before that, I used to overthink a lot. Say, if I get a role, I design everything about the character, right to the length of the character's nails. I'm serious! Like this kind of character would probably have chipped nail varnish.

Haemamool: You interpret beyond the role you get.



Charoenpura: But recently, instead of just the superficial interpretation, I start interpreting their background and what they've been through. Why would this character suddenly say this line or why do they burst into tears? These are things that I didn't understand before that. Back then, I would think, 'why the heck are you crying so much?' when I get roles like that. However, now I would think about what they've been through. I started to understand life and its tolls. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not.

Haemamool: There's a story behind what you see in the scene.

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] Exactly, exactly.

Haemamool: This person, this character—they have their backstory. You just don't see it in the scene.

Charoenpura: The viewers don't see it. I had to make it up myself. Say, if this is a family scene with us three or four sittings here, I would also think about your character and where they've been etc. I would think about these things compared to before where I would only focus on myself and the character. Now, I'm starting to see beyond that. Perhaps it has something to do with age.

Haemamool: I just wanted to say that with your case, it's intriguing. For us three writers sitting here [Nishi, Haemamool, and Tipayanon], we are writers, while you are an actress. So you get to see that the way we deal with life is different. In your [Charoenpura] case, you may feel that the world of acting is one that you're familiar with, and it's like a safe space for you when you become someone else or take on other roles. On the other hand, being yourself in real life doesn't feel as safe, and you want to return to that comfort zone.

Charoenpura: You're right.

Haemamool: It's the same with writers, perhaps.

Charoenpura: It's safer being yourself.

Haemamool: When we write, those hours when we get to writing, we get to be ourselves.

Charoenpura: And it eats away at you.

[ROMANTICISING HUMAN SUFFERINGS]

Haemamool: Yes. By the way, I feel like I'm the MC here. [laughs] Anyway, continuing, this links to the energy used when producing creative work together e.g. in writing novels or how you feel towards acting. I've discovered that there's a corrosive condition that eats away at the writer in using the energy to create.



Charoenpura: Like what Anusorn experienced before his lifestyle changed?

Tipayanon: It's a state where you cannot handle other things outside of literature. How should I explain this?

Charoenpura: Like you cannot control any other things whatsoever?

Tipayanon: Yes, like every other aspect in life is collapsing. [laughs]

Charoenpura: Your social life and everything.

Tipayanon: It may sound harsh, but actually, Uthis has written a book, *On Literature*, and I love what he talks about in the book. I've been thinking about it today. Last night, someone was talking about Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai, and comparing life to flying aimlessly³—

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] Like a legless bird?

Tipayanon: I felt that it's alright to say that. But on the other hand, he probably doesn't want to be like that. There are those who think 'Wong-ness'⁴ is cool. However, I believe that no one wants to be in a situation like that in real life.

Haemamool: They're all suffering.

³ A reference to Leslie Cheung's character, Yuddy, from Wong Kar Wai's *Days of Being Wild* (1990).

⁴ Wong-ness or '*kwam Wong*' is a reference to a popular Thai subculture trend where the loneliness and emptiness portrayed in Wong Kar Wai's films are perceived as cool and imitated among certain millennials and members of Generation Z.

Tipayanon: Exactly. They think Leslie Cheung's character looks super cool with women chasing after him—

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] But in real life no one sets the lighting and film you with beautiful cinematography.

Haemamool: People romanticise this suffering.

Tipayanon: People think these people's lives are romantic, but in truth, they're just broken individuals. It's like a state of *kintsugi*—if you want to describe it in Japanese. [laughs] I'm grabbing that chance to use a Japanese word. *Kintsugi* is when you repair broken things and make it beautiful again, and those 'Wong' people who are trying to fix themselves in order to live again—



Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] In a nutshell, it's suffering.

Tipayanon: Yes. But people view that brokenness as romantic when it is actually—

Charoenpura: Here, I can romantically summarise your life story: I was writing until it was eating me up, so I decided to embark on a journey about food instead. That's super like a legless bird.

Tipayanon: One thing is that it's hard for people who are going through to express it. Their sufferings are perceived through a particular, predetermined image, but it's hard for those facing it. When the world is collapsing around you, you start to wonder about all these characters you can control, and why you can't handle anything at all in real life. That's one of the problems. Writing literature is something that uses up your energy in this aspect.

Charoenpura: True, because often writers' lives like yours are a mess. Actors' too. I'm not criticising you guys. [laughs]

Haemamool: I think we are eaten up by these energies.

Charoenpura: And when we don't have any left, we become selfish, and we won't be able to love anyone else.

Tipayanon: And we become headstrong and have to get everything our way.

[EMBRACING IMPERFECTIONS]

Charoenpura: But Khun Nishi has a family and a child. And actually, her family life is much better than that of us three. How do you do it? I genuinely respect those with a family and children. It's so difficult. Think about it. At the end of the day, you come back home, tired and wanting to sleep. But here it's like, if you have a child waiting for you, then you have to play with it, read storybooks for their intellectual development etc. but what if—you don't want to read the book, you're sleepy, you want a beer? Do you have moments like that, Khun Nishi? She looks like she's got everything together. She definitely looks saner than all of us. [laughs]

Nishi: Before I talk about this, allow me to start with another subject before answering your question. For me, without novels, my life would not be able to exist as a (novel) writer. The reason for that is because if I don't write novels, then I will have to consume the devastating news that is going on around the world. Because I am like this, if I could choose, I would rather not read or watch any of the news, and if I weren't a writer, then I would turn a blind eye on current affairs and live happily in a beautiful bubble. However, as a writer, I have to face them. I have to collect information on the good and the bad so that I can write about them.



People often think that writing novels is about portraying the good things in the world—that's how one usually sees novels. But in truth, primarily, the core of novels and what's hidden within—we typically write about what you (Tipayanon and Haemamool) mentioned. We write about imperfect things, about the rotten side of society and humanity; all of these thoughts are portrayed in novels. Thus, the writer themselves have to be continuously aware and reflect all of those things out through their writings.

This is what I wanted to first mention as a writer. Now to answer your remark that I have a perfect family and having a balanced life, I must say that I am no ideal human. However, writing this type of novel allowed me to understand that humans are not perfect, and it also made me aware that I am not perfect, either. As such, if one is not perfect themselves, then how can you expect your other half or your spouse to be perfect when you aren't, either. That's why I can let

go of the things he does. The same goes for raising a child. My child is two years old, and what society expects of me, what they labelled mothers, is that as a mum I have to be healthy and perfect, that every woman is born a mum. But that's crazy. That's not true. When I raise my two-year-old, I raise the kid my way and not in the stereotypical 'mumsy' way.

As you can see, I am not a perfect mother, but I want to show my child that I am not perfect. Like for example, people may tell their children *it's a red light, so don't cross the road*, but I would say *there's a car coming, so don't cross the road*. I always say to my child that I sometimes make mistakes, so if you see something that you think is correct, then trust yourself—that you don't have to believe me with everything. I am not your everything. This is how I raise my child.

[THE BODY IS A TEMPLE: ON BEING A WRITER AND ARTIST]

Charoenpura: One last question for you. If you don't have any financial restraints, what are the factors that will make you get back to writing novels again? Is there anything you still want to explore? I'll pay you 40,000 baht per month for you to squeeze it out of you. Is there a story you'd like to tell? Say, if every other aspect of your life is smooth sailing, you'd have the energy to finally tell that story.

Haemamool: It's like what Khun Nishi here has just said. First, you have to embrace your imperfections, and you'll see that it is not just about physical or mental flaws, or even societal, but you will see that there are no concerns that can make an individual feel at ease. I don't know how to explain it. It's like, even if I don't live in a society that is like this, there are things I still want to write about because there remain various frustrations and ideas that I want to explore. Then there's always love and resentment in other things that I can write about.



Charoenpura: We are still human, after all.

Haemamool: We haven't reached that perfect state yet. We are still incomplete individuals and full of questions about perfection. That's why I think that regardless of the society I live in, even if I have a stable income, answering these questions, particularly at this age, when I am in my forties, I think that I've passed that point already. I've passed that point where I'm concerned about my income. Now it's more about fighting my inner self. But the question is, I'm asking myself at 44, whether I still need to use that same amount of energy that I used to write a book. Do I need to use the same energy because I feel like I'm crossing into yet another phase in life? I think it's good that in the past few years, I had a chance to do stage work in with Khun Toshiki Okada, who is a playwright and stage director. It made me view other arts with more understanding—in

this case, the art of theatre. It was also during the time when I was looking to get out of my usual way of working. It turns out Khun Okada came in at the right moment. Those who have been following Khun Okada's works will see that his plays are not what one would call 'realist' theatre. Instead, they are exaggerated and often like a performance within a performance. And it made me think about my creative process. Say, if I were to write about actors and performing, or even writing itself, the energy I use could be compared to exaggerating or fully immersing myself into a role—

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] Like hitting yourself to break your leg.

Haemamool: Yes. Like putting all of my life into it. Like Joaquin Phoenix. You know, being consumed by the role you are performing. And it was like, that's not possible anymore at this point in life. You have to find other ways of channelling one's energy while maintaining your wellbeing. At the same time, you have to make sure that the message and the emotions you want to pass onto the readers keep their intensity. It's finding that new source of energy to do so.

Charoenpura: I understand that. I used to be very harsh on myself when I acted, but now my body can't cope with that anymore.

Haemamool: We shouldn't have to burn ourselves out that much. And the worst thing is that we are aware of how much we've given into that work. When the readers see your work, some will understand the message you are trying to convey, and some won't be able to relate at all. These things all affect our feelings, though it's not a big deal. What we can do is wait for the work to be re-read. Of course, the messages in literature are never straightforward for people to directly receive the message the same way right from the first read. There are so many factors, so much so that you have to ask yourself if you should adapt your creative method at this age compared to what you did when you were 25 years old.

Charoenpura: Anusorn has passed that phase. I mean, since I've known you, this is when there's a sense of resolve about you more than ever. Do you think there will be a moment where you feel more resolved than this?

Tipayanon: I clearly understand what you are trying to say. When meeting a younger writer, I see my younger self in them. It's like when you're playing football—you want to run to the front of the goal and score, and do it over and over again—all the while enjoying it.

However, at this point in my life, it's about how to last the whole 90 minutes. [laughs] You have to realise that your energy, your life force, is limited. Writing until 3 a.m. and waking up at 6 in the morning is not how you live life. You might feel that you've reached a 'literary orgasm' and that you're so cool, but the crucial point is that you've lacked the maturity to carry it out. When you organise your life by using another form of energy, you will cut out all the unnecessary things. You will feel that you don't have to attend certain events, you don't need to meet some of those friends—maybe they're not your real friends. Many things will be sifted out and reduced to the fact that you only have a certain amount of time, and that your energy is limited. You may be

doing other things, but your heart is set on literature. After doing that other thing, you come back to the desk to write, and after that, you do other things.

Balancing and preserving your energy instead of thinking 'I want to become a famous writer' and chasing after fame. I think that feeling is the same as football players who run up and down the field so that they can be on the camera. On the other hand, with the 90-minute analogy, those who know how to sustain themselves, who can find an opening to pass the ball onto another player—

Charoenpura: [Crosstalk] Important to the game but doesn't have to be in the spotlight.

Tipayanon: I think it's a state where, when you grow older, you can find happiness. Like Uthis, he drinks beer, but he doesn't binge like there's no tomorrow. Many things, even today's topic of 'rebel' or standing up against the system—not in the sense that you wake up one day, thinking 'I will rebel so the world will remember me'—no, it's not like that. Rather, it's rebelling to protect your remaining energy and using it effectively.

I've been to all of Uthis' exhibition, and twice that I went on the opening day. I'm a fan. And I've seen his paintings from when it was sold for a considerable amount to most recently. It was worth one book license—for one painting. I thought, 'you don't even have to write'. [laughs] Your art is worth a book license, yet you still want to write novels. These things demonstrate that once you have another source of sustenance, another energy source, things become smoother for the literature you want to create and the determination to write. It really helps. I mean for me I don't paint, but having that other side gig means you won't starve. I've been living in the countryside for the past year, and the locals would bring rice to me—one sack from this person, one from another. I have enough rice to last me for five years. Simply put, I won't starve either.

The most important thing for me in creating literature is finding balance; balance in the sense that you don't have to worry about finding enough to feed yourself the next day. I think that's the problem for everyone. When we talk about literature, we overlook the fact that writers have to survive, too. It's like what Khun Nishi said. Thai literature, too, is perceived as an elite topic. Often Thai literature explores ideologies more than physical matters. [To Charoenpura] You should give Uthis that 40,000 baht this instant—sign him a cheque. [laughs] And things will be much easier.

Charoenpura: It's much more tangible, isn't it? But it's true. When I don't have to worry about things in life, I want to write. It's like, you feel that there's time and you're not stressed.

Tipayanon: And you become kinder towards other people. I mean recently, I don't feel like I have to compete against anyone and I stopped seeing them as competitors. I'm willing to help people who ask me. It's like I've grown old enough to realise that the world is what it is. You can only set your heart to what you can do regardless of haters or admirers.

Charoenpura: [To Nishi] As these two [Haemamool and Tipayanon] have discussed age and being harsh on oneself when younger, I'd like to ask if you've experienced any moments like that

in life, and which phase do you like yourself more? The stage where you're harsh on yourself, or when you've accepted your imperfections and is happy with yourself?

Nishi: For me, I view that youth—or myself in my youth—the biggest fear I had was the fear of becoming old, not physically but spiritually. I think that this is a fear that every human has. In Uthiss novel, *Silhouette of Desire*, the theme also talks about youth. I think that politician, as a profession, is one that is always youthful in the sense that they demand to be in constant control. But in truth, you cannot control everything in life. Just like Anusorn has said, when we are older, we start to come to terms and let go of things that we cannot control.

Regarding my writings from my earlier days, they are dramatic with tension building up towards the climax. However, there's always a drumroll to a final conclusion, and a single truth is presented to the readers. But in reality, looking back, I'm a bit embarrassed with my writing back then. Why does it have to be like that? Why do I have to present that sole conclusion? As I become older, I realised that good novels don't have to provide a single answer. Instead, it should make the readers come up with more questions, or perhaps many different conclusions for the readers to choose from. So in that sense, as a writer, the good thing about being older is that these things are reflected in my writing.

Charoenpura: On that note, I would like to thank you very much for joining us today. I hope our audience today enjoyed our stories of being old and young. Rebels grow old too [laughs]. If we rebel and die young, we become legends. If we don't, then we become old people. Like, we'll probably stop going to Che Guevara raves because we're too tired. [laughs] Thank you, everyone, for today. Thank you to our audience and the writers on stage as well—sawasdee ka.

Speakers

Kanako Nishi

Kanako Nishi won the Sakunosuke Oda Prize in 2007 for her novel *Tsutenkaku* (Osaka Tower), and in 2012 she received the first Kawai Hayao Prize for her novel *Fukuwarai* (Funny Face). Her masterpiece *Saraba!* won the prestigious Naoki Prize in 2014. She made her literary debut in 2004 with the short story collection *Aoi* (Blue). Born in Tehran, Iran, where her family relocated for her father's job, she subsequently lived in Japan for several years before moving with her family to Cairo, Egypt, where she spent four of her elementary school years. She now lives and writes in Tokyo.



Inthira Charoenpura (Sine)

Sine Charoenpura started professionally singing and acting at age 13. Her best-known roles are Mae Nakin in the Thai horror film *Nang Nak* (1999) and the warrior Princess Loehkinin in *King Naresuan Part 2* (2007). Sine has also written several books, including *Sam Wan Dee See Wan Sao* (2018), which aims to raise awareness about depressive disorder, and *Ban Terng Chueng Rai*, which tells the inside stories of the Thai entertainment industry.



Anusorn Tipayanon

Anusorn Tipayanon is a three-time S.E.A. Write Award nominee. His prose style and elements of loneliness and loss in his work have earned him the nickname of “the Thai Murakami.” Notable books include *London and the Secret of the Kiss*, *8 1/2 Richter*, *In Search of the Lost Blue Heart*, *Chungking Sexpress*, *Neutrino Romance*, *The Southeast Wind of Love*, and *My Chefs*. Apart from writing and translating, Tipayanon also teaches multiple subjects including Art Criticism, Film and Literature Studies, Architectural Design, Visual Culture, and Pattern of Perception at several Thai universities.



Uthis Haemamool

Uthis Haemamool won the S.E.A. Write Award and the Seven Book Award for *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi*, his third novel, in 2009. He was cited as one of the most important people in Thailand by CNNGo. In 2013, he was invited to speak along with the noted Thai film director Apichartpong Weerasethakul in ‘Work in Memory,’ an artist’s workshop held by Kyoto City University of Arts Art Gallery @KCUA. Based on his interchange with six Japanese artists who also took part in this workshop, he subsequently wrote a medium-length novel titled *Kyoto: Hidden Sense*. From 2014 to 2015, Uthis served as editor-in-chief of *Writer Magazine*, a Thai literary magazine, and *Prakod*, a literary journal published by the Thai Ministry of Culture’s Office of Contemporary Art and Culture. In June 2017, his latest novel *Pratthana – A Portrait of Possession* (Silhouette of Desire in English) was published in Thai. In the same year, he held an exhibition in Bangkok titled *Silhouette of Desire* with his own drawings and paintings. In 2018, he received the Silpathorn Award for Literature from the Thai Ministry of Culture’s Office of Contemporary Art and Culture.



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