

**M**ost readers often have on their bookshelves stacks of Six Sigma books and various self-help titles lined up beside books by Gabriel Garcia Marquez or new Malaysiana titles from the likes of Kam Raslan. And invariably nestled between these “necessary” reads for the average working professional are a few books that have left lasting impressions on the individual.

These are books with tired spines — their covers worn and creased, and pages marked and curled. They are fond childhood memorabilia, favourite titles read to toddlers by guardians, or gifts for birthdays, or hunted down in old dusty bookshops as a more definitive interest develops in the young reader. It may be titles like *Little Women*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Treasure Island* or an adventure series from Enid Blyton, a Lat comic, or rows of lovingly thumbed issues of *Mad Magazine*.

Reading is without doubt instrumental to a child's development, and volumes of these colourful stories mould their formative years, whether orally or graphically delivered. What we often forget is that not all children have equal access or exposure to books, says former journalist Daphne Lee. This amicable and bubbly lady speaks about the birth of a community library for children, The Reading Room, nestled in the quiet neighbourhood of Section 17 in Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

Daphne was born in Segamat and grew up in Batu Pahat. Both towns in Johor then had no extensive bookshops of their own. However, her parents had shelves in their home crammed with classics and she devoured them hungrily. Her exposure to children's literature began when she furthered her studies in England, and then later as a journalist for six years with a leading English daily, where she wrote a column on children's literature. “I bought my first picture book when I was in my 20s, and have collected books all my life,” she says at her cheery library. “I like children in small doses. I have three of my own, which is a larger dose, but I can't give them back,” she says as she bursts into a bubbly laugh.

“The genre of children's literature only came clearer to me when I started writing for my column. The perception most people have about the genre and its contents is that they are simplistic and are meant only for children,” she says, adding that adult interest in the genre is not rare, especially as collectors.

“Most adults know that reading is important, but they usually dictate what their child reads. My personal belief is that a child should be given free rein to choose his or her own reading material. The library (The Reading Room) is about allowing children to read and discover books — it is about exposure, and empowerment. I think shaping your own interest is instrumental in your development as a reader,” she shares.

The “baggage” from her previous full-time job saw a large accumulation of review copies in her home, which Daphne had planned to share in a library for children. The scope of her project has grown from ideation to the formation of this newly established library. The Reading Room, launched early this month, is also designed as a centre where children can be exposed to a reading environment and reading choices. It would be ideal if the library is accessible to the general public, but Daphne says the project lacks financial resources and manpower to expand.

“My focus is on children from homes and shelters because these children don't have access to many books, or to adults who will spend time reading to them,” she says. Daphne also plans to provide training for supervisors at these facilities on the different methods and techniques related to exposing children to a holistic reading culture, such as storytelling. “We can engage children in some drawing, or try some music and movement, or any form of expression after a storytelling session.”

Telling a story is not just reading straight from a book. “Any self-respecting child will interrupt, interject, or comment,” Daphne chuckles. “And the adult should let children ask questions, and interact. The process and interaction also build confidence, something many of these children lack.”

The main sponsor of the Reading Room is The Dram Projects, which covers the rent and provides Daphne with some funds to purchase books. It is a privately funded community project founded four years ago, and plays host to arts-related activities and offers performance spaces as well. This includes a variety of interesting events, including workshops, poetry free-styling competitions, and open music gigs.

Besides freelance writing, Daphne works full-time with The Dram Projects as a project director. She is the sole employee and coordinator of The Reading Room, which currently houses some 1,500