

# The e-book revolution

**Siti Syameen Md Khalili** talks to an e-book publishing pioneer who has discovered the joy of reading at a late age

**R**ODNEY Toh did not come from a wealthy nor highly educated family. His parents' approach to raising children is typically "China-man", as he describes it. They had not learned to read but managed to teach themselves by watching TV and from the newspapers.

Before buying his first book at the age of 17, Toh had never read any book or other literary works outside what was required at school.

Led solely by his own curiosity, thirst for knowledge and a drive to better his life, he soon discovered more titles. This started a deep love affair with books, which eventually led him to the enthralling world of writing and publishing.

Toh, who spent the last 15 years working in bookstores and out of track of the developments in the publishing industry. Recently, he founded Kim & Kerrie Sdn Bhd, a company that specialises in electronic publication and e-book publishing in the country.

## FROM READING TO WRITING

His career in the publishing world kickstarted when he got a job in a bookstore, cleaning bookshelves, manning the cash register and doing errands. He says: "I worked in a Christian bookstore for six years, managing one of its four-store chain. I loved the job



because I wanted to have access to books I could not afford."

He adds that over the years, he has collected more print books and his house is now filled with shelves after shelves of books.

"After that, I went to work for MPH for 12 years. In the last few years, I helped MPH start its digital presence and its own platform to publish electronic books or e-books," adds Toh, who was senior business development manager of MPH Bookstores, with over 200 employees under him.

His love for literature eventually led him to the world of writing. He says that the book that changed his life is Henri J. M. Nouwen's *The Road To Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*.

"The story is about a man who gave up everything to care for a retarded boy. I like the way the author writes. He is very personal. The author says that what is most personal, if you are truthful to yourself, is most universal."

"For example, jealousy is something we all feel and can relate to. What I feel and understand about a book may have some meaning for others as well. So I began to write. The book started my writing journey," he says.

When Toh undertook a postgraduate degree, he and three friends — Benson Wong, Lenny Chiah and Steven Shim — pooled ideas and resources to author a non-fiction title called *MBA Edge*. The book targets those who are interested to pursue

Master's of Business Administration (MBA). They went on to author two more books, *MBA Edge Volume 2* and *MBA Edge Volume 3*.

"I wrote the books with my classmates who went through an M2 course at the same time too. We just wanted to share our experiences, our ambitions, why we took up MBA. We've trademarked the name *MBA Edge*, and the book has evolved to become a bimonthly post graduate magazine. We plan to write the fourth volume of the *MBA Edge* by year's end. This time we want to rope in more MBA graduates to get their perspectives as well," he says.

How about fiction? "I don't think I have the skill! Non-fiction is based on what we've gone through and facts — I find that easy to write about. With fiction, you have to imagine, think outside the box. Narration is not easy for me."

That said, Toh also enjoys fiction and one of his favourite authors is Ernest Hemingway.

## WRITING TO PUBLISHING

Toh's foray into publishing business seems only natural for a person who has been in the book industry for 18 years. After bidding adieu to MPH, Toh founded Kim & Kerrie to help more local publishers and authors jump on the e-book bandwagon.

He stakes his bets on the EPUB format as he claims that the digital format is more universal, being compatible with Apple, Android and Linux-based handheld devices that are tailored support e-reader functionality.

"The one very unique feature of EPUB e-Book is that it allows text to reflow to fit any screen nicely. When the font size of the text is resized, the entire content of the e-Book will 'adjust' automatically to fit optimally to any particular screen."

"Furthermore, you can embed vid-

eos, photos and images into the EPUB. A book can be read the reading experience with the EPUB format allows for a DRM system to be applied to it."

Kim & Kerrie's specialty is end-to-end e-publishing solutions and services, offering digitisation, e-publishing, design and development of e-books.

Toh explains, "We offer concrete solutions through our course, the E-book Jumpstart Programme for Publishers, in collaboration with Lightning Source (UK).

"In this programme, publishers learn to publish e-book in a week. These are practical step-by-step guidance on e-publishing using the best practices worldwide."

Toh notes that collaboration with Lightning Source will also enable Kim & Kerrie to help publishers and authors tap into a wider market via 22 other online sites based around the world which are already affiliated with Lightning Source.

## THE WAY TO GO

Toh believes print books publishers have no option but to join the e-book revolution, but he also notes that there will always be readers who will never say goodbye to dog-eared paperbacks and smelly hard covers. In fact, Toh admits that while he buys a lot of e-books to read on his Kobo, iPad and Galaxy Note, he still buys print books.

"I don't believe e-book will kill print books, as there will always be traditional book lovers. But trends show that the growth of e-books is exponential. In simple terms, globally, the sales of e-book are growing steadily at a triple digit where as sales of print books are consistently experiencing single-digit decline. So print publishers worldwide do not have a choice but to embrace e-publishing to substitute the decline."