

Joy and knowledge from

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Our Deputy Prime Minister, no matter how busy, always finds time for his passion: reading. He shares his thoughts on his favourite books, how they have influenced him and why most Malaysians don't read.

READING may not come easily to most Malaysians, but it certainly does to Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. He reads during flights, in the car, during commercial breaks while watching TV, on the treadmill and at bedtime.

His love for reading is legendary among his staff members who find themselves scrambling to keep up.

"Oh yes, he reads all the time, and he puts the rest of us to shame," says Poziah Haji Abdul Rahman who is Najib's senior public relations officer.

She adds that his voracious reading habit has definitely prompted his staff to read more too. "We do try to read whatever he reads so that we can keep abreast of the latest issues," she says.

"He usually reads very current books," confirms Akmar Hisham Mokhles, press secretary to Najib in the latter's capacity as Defence Minister.

"It's quite intimidating. We don't want to seem ignorant so we try to read too."

"When we see him reading on a flight, we try to arm ourselves with some reading material too ... usually a newspaper or a current affairs magazine," says Poziah. "And he reads very fast. If a book takes him one week, I will take one month to read the same book."

We are chatting with Poziah and Akmar while waiting for Najib in his library at his official residence in Putrajaya.

It is understandable why his officers are in awe of him - after checking out the two-level library, it is clear that Najib's reading tastes are wide and far ranging.

A handful of fiction titles grace the gleaming wooden shelves. These include the complete works of Shakespeare, a thick, handsomely bound volume of *Puisi Melayu*, a couple of novels by Nora Roberts and a set of Dan Brown novels still sealed in plastic. Later he tells us that fiction is not something he has much time for.

The library reveals what does interests him the most: histories, political analyses as well as biographies of world leaders: we notice well-thumbed copies of Nelson Mandela's *The Long Walk to Freedom* and Churchill's *A Biography* by Roy Jenkins.

Najib is, of course, a busy man, so re-reading only occurs when a book makes a big impact on him, like *Blue Ocean Strategy* by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne.

Poziah says Najib liked the book so much that he ordered 30 copies for members of his staff.

So it does not surprise us that he has this book in hand when he enters the library. *Blue Ocean Strategy* is that hot new business concept that Najib describes as "getting business opportunities by thinking out of the box, and creating a demand for something that was not there before".

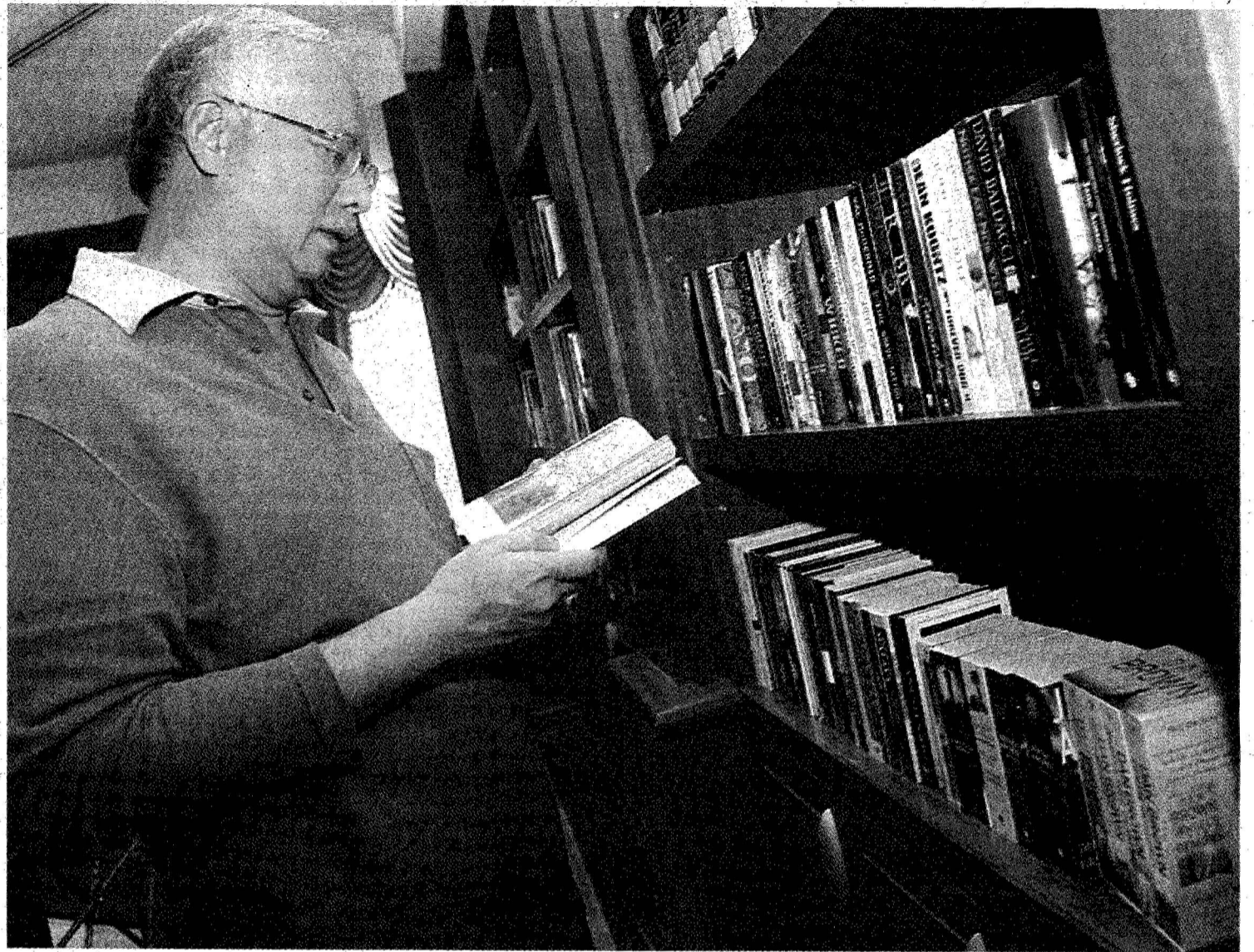
We start off by expressing our admiration for his library of which he is rather dismissive.

"Personally, I would have wanted the library a little closer to my bedroom," he says. "It is tucked away in a corner and rather lonely. I prefer to read in my little study area in my bedroom."

He also reveals that he has more books in his office and in his private home in Kuala Lumpur. He estimates that he has about 3,000 books. However, there are not many that date back very far as he believes in spring-cleaning his collection every few years.

Looking relaxed and comfortable in a light cotton sweater and cargo pants, Najib reminds us more of an erudite professor than a busy politician.

Like most book-lovers, Najib started reading from a young age. His parents encouraged him to read when he was a boy and, having started, he says, he "sort of continued. Of course, there were times when I was doing more



Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak in his two-level library; counting the books in his private residence as well as those in this library in his Putrajaya home, the Deputy Prime Minister has about 3,000 titles!

studying than reading, but the habit stayed with me. I have always enjoyed reading."

What books made an impression on you as a child?

I can't really remember specific titles but I was crazy about Enid Blyton and Biggles (fictional pilot and adventurer created by Captain W.E. Johns), of course.

Did your parents buy you a lot of books?

Yes, my parents bought me books. My father did a lot of reading and was a role model.

When did you start reading serious works?

When I was at university. I started with military history. I was interested in reading about the battles and the strategy employed in warfare, and how certain things can affect the outcome of a battle.

Did these books influence the way you think as a leader now?

The principles they presented, yes, but I don't consider myself taking an aggressive or war-like stance as a politician.

You have said that you don't have much time for fiction. What was the last novel you read?

I sort of started reading *The Fourth Estate* (by Jeffrey Archer) ... and ... yes, John Le Carre's books.

We noticed a few copies of Shakespeare's plays in your library.

I did Shakespeare in school, in Malvern (Boys College in Worcestershire, England).

»Malaysians don't read as much as we should because we think we can get by without reading ... and most of our children think that just by studying and mugging, they can get through exams«

DATUK SERI NAJIB TUN RAZAK

We understand that your daughter, Nooryana Najwa, is quite a reader....

Yes, she is. I think she saw me reading and that sort of rubbed off on her. She likes fiction, but now she's into the serious stuff. She was doing an IB (International Baccalaureate) so she's been reading a lot about Stalin, Mao, Hitler, Truman and so on. She's just been accepted into Georgetown University (in Washington DC) to read politics and international relations. (Nooryana is 18 years old.)

We wonder who could have influenced her? Might she be the third generation of your family to be involved in politics?

You can't tell. I'm not going to push her; I'll just let her develop in her own way.

Do you recommend books to her?

We discuss a lot about the serious stuff, we have very stimulating discussions.

How about your son (Norashman, who's 16)? Does he like reading?

No, my son is into sports. He is not into serious stuff. His favourites are tennis and football. We share the same team, we both support MU (Manchester United). And he is passionate about (tennis star) Roger Federer.

Do you make it a point to visit bookshops when you travel?

Yes, I do, especially in London. I like Hatchards. Foyle's is too big, you can get lost in there. I prefer Hatchards, which is more compact.

How about local bookstores?

I normally go to Kinokuniya (in Suria KLCC). I also go to MPH and Borders, but I go to Kinokuniya for the latest books.

Do you spend a lot on books?

I don't stinge on books. I don't buy frivolously either. And, of course, at a lot of functions, I am given books.

What has reading brought to your life?

Enjoyment. Interesting insights into people, events, ideas. Sometimes certain anecdotes

a life-long habit

register with you. Mandela's *Walk to Freedom* was very inspiring. I like a little anecdote in it, about how when you're in prison, small things matter.

Mandela had a small plant on his windowsill and just to watch it grow gave him hope because he saw life in front of him and that gave him a lot of hope for the future. I thought that was very insightful about how people adjust to a different environment.

I also enjoyed (US general and former secretary of state) Colin Powell's *My American Journey*. There are two quotes I thought were great. One is, "Take your work seriously but don't take yourself seriously". I thought that was nice: sometimes you laugh at yourself but you take your work seriously.

The other quote is, "Don't react to things immediately, it always looks better the next day".

If you have a problem don't respond immediately. Sleep on it and it might be more manageable in the morning.

Do you practise this?
I try to!

You have written books. Where do you get your inspiration?

Actually, they are not great books. They are just selections of my speeches. There is one pictorial I did of Bosnia where I took most of the pictures myself.

So you are also a photographer?

Yes, but not a good one. When I went to Bosnia some of the pictures I took were very interesting and poignant. I remember one of them was of a small makeshift grave with five wooden markers.

They were actually babies who were killed when a shell fell on the hospital. They died before they could be named and were buried in one grave. It was a poignant reminder of the futility of war.

Do you think you will ever write a novel?
No, I have never aspired to write fiction.

Are there any bookshops that you want to tell our readers about? Any special ones that you have encountered in your travels?

Not a bookshop, but in Ephesus, an old Greek-Roman city in Istanbul, there are the ruins of a great library - the Library of Celsus. It was the centre of the city. You see, this was a civilisation that was based on knowledge and wisdom. In such a society, the library was the centre in physical terms as well as in terms of what its people did habitually.

What do you think about our libraries?

We lack libraries, but it's a chicken and egg problem because even if you have libraries, people don't indulge in reading. Malaysians' (lack of) the reading habit is deplorable.

Why don't Malaysians read?

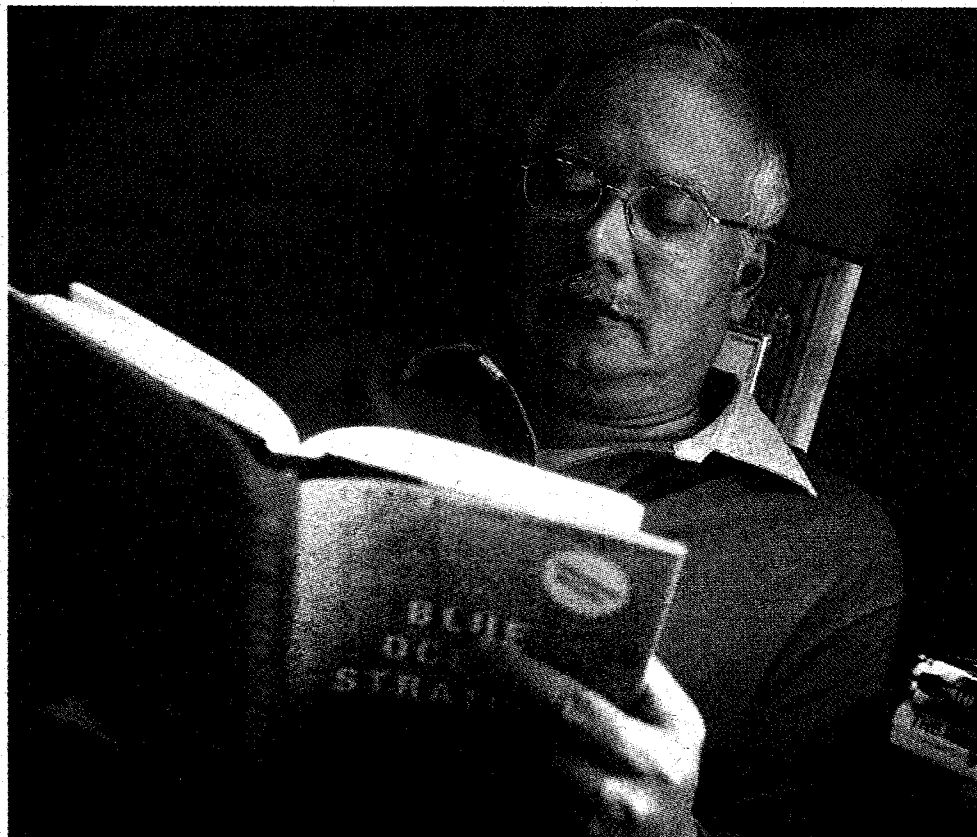
We Malaysians don't read as much as we should (because) we think we can get by without reading. And most of our children think that just by studying and mugging, they can get through exams.

Would you blame TV or the Internet?

It was bad even before the Internet revolution.

Can the Government do more in terms of tax relief?

Well, even if there are books, people don't read because we switched to the Malay medium and this is the problem, especially with



Najib with one of his current favourites, *Blue Ocean Strategy*; he liked the book so much, he bought copies for his staff to read.

Malay kids. Practically all the books are in English and since their ability to read in English is somewhat limited, they feel it would be an uphill task to comprehend them.

As for books in Bahasa, although there are some very good ones, they are more on the literary side.

The emphasis is on style and they're more emotive; they arouse emotions. They don't really contain ideas, facts or knowledge, as much as English books do.

Would it be a good idea to translate more books into Bahasa?

Yes, but it is not that rewarding ... people can't make a living out of it. The market is too small so nobody does it.

And translations aren't as good as the originals. You lose a lot of the meaning because English is a language that is idiomatic and there will be many nuances that will be lost in translation.

What do you think can be done to improve the level of English in the country?

I think we should strengthen our command of both the national language and English. I think all of us have the ability to be proficient in at least two languages.

I believe the system itself should reward creativity. This means less emphasis on the objective side and more on the ability to write essays and on literature.

But we need literature teachers, and the teachers who are products of the Malay medium cannot teach English lit. So, before we can introduce lit we need to train the teachers, and we need to wait for the next generation of teachers who have gone through the system and are proficient in English.

I believe that to understand the significance of a language one has to study its literature. I am comfortable in both languages. I don't think in English when I speak in Bahasa, neither do I think in Bahasa when I speak in English. I do think we need to develop

Malaysians who are proficient in both languages. This will take time. Once you change the policy, you have to go through two or three generations before you see the products of the change.

Do you think reading campaigns work?

No, not really. Reading is a habit that has to be ingrained. Unless you can create an environment and a system that encourage reading and reward people who read, I don't think much can be achieved by a campaign. Campaigns by nature are short-lived.

Do you read magazines?

Yes, I read *The Economist*, *Time*, *Newsweek*. I also read for leisure ... golf magazines, and *Men's Health* magazine.

As Minister of Defence do you also read military magazines like *Jane's*?

Yes, I do read *Jane's*. And I do still read military books, and books about military leaders ... like Powell.

What do you admire about Colin Powell?

I admire different leaders for different reasons. I admire Powell because he is a very balanced person and very articulate. Mandela because he has courage and conviction, as well as forbearance and wisdom. Alexander the Great because he was a fearless military leader - he led from the front - and, at the same time, a builder of civilisations.

Did you see the movie *Alexander* starring Colin Farrell?

Yes, I was disappointed. He looked very "pon-dan-ish" (effeminate).

Who else do you admire?

Winston Churchill ... I like to quote him. When the chips were down he was the one who rallied the whole country, and you need that kind of leader.

But they tossed him out when the war (World War II) was over....

Because they thought that in peacetime he'd be the wrong man to lead the country.

Do you order books on the Internet?

No I don't. I like to hold the book in my hand, then make my choice. I'm a traditionalist in that way. However, I sometimes surf the Net for information. There are magazines that review books too. I read them.

Get his books

THESE are some of the books Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak mentions during our interview with him and that we noticed on his library shelves. The Kinokuniya Bookstore at Suria KLCC is offering a 25% discount on the first four titles in the list; see below for details.

A Long Walk to Freedom

By Nelson Mandela

Publisher: Little, Brown; 656 pages
ISBN: 978-031-654-8182

Attila The Hun

By John Man

Publisher: Bantam; 400 pages
ISBN: 978-055-381-6587

Blue Ocean Strategy

By W. Chan Kim & Renée Mauborgne

Publisher: Harvard Business School Press; 256 pages
ISBN: 978-159-139-6192

Churchill: A Biography (paperback)

By Roy Jenkins

Publisher: Pan; 1020 pages
ISBN: 978-033-048-8051

Condi: The Condoleezza Rice Story

By Antonia Felix

Publisher: Politico's Publishing Ltd; 304 pages
ISBN: 978-184-275-1435

Elizabeth the Great

By Elizabeth Jenkins

Publisher: Phoenix; 336 pages
ISBN: 978-184-212-5380

Genghis Khan

By John Man

Publisher: Bantam; 489 pages
ISBN: 978-055-381-4989

My American Journey

By Colin Powell & Joseph Persico

Publisher: Ballantine Books; 688 pages
ISBN: 978-034-546-6419

Saddam: His Rise and Fall

By Con Coughlin

Publisher: Ecco; 448 pages
ISBN: 978-006-050-5431

The Real Fidel Castro

By Julia E. Sweig (Foreword) & Leicester Colta

Publisher: Yale University Press; 360 pages
ISBN: 978-030-010-7609

Get a 25% discount on *A Long Walk to Freedom*, *Attila the Hun*, *Blue Ocean Strategy* and *Churchill: A Biography* by presenting this page upon payment at the Kinokuniya Bookstore at Suria KLCC.

This offer is valid until April 1, 2007, or while stocks last. It is not valid with other promotions and is not exchangeable for cash. One page is valid for only one copy of each book and only original pages will be accepted.

Are you ever influenced by what is on the best-sellers list?

No, I'm not.

Are there any books that you think should be compulsory reading or that you would highly recommend?

I like books that inspire and leave an indelible mark on the reader. It's hard to name just one book.

Do you think our other leaders read?

I wouldn't like to pass comments on my colleagues... They might think I'm making disparaging remarks about them! (Laughs.)