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Celebrating a full and well-lived life

THE birthday girl looked as lovely as I have always known her to be. It was hard to believe she was all of 90 years old.

Indeed, the years have been kind to Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and I am convinced how she looks simply reflects her inner beauty, kindness and good heart.

As I sang *Happy Birthday* to her with family, friends and many, many admirers, I thought back to 1996, when I scored one of my proudest scoops as a journalist: an exclusive interview with her.

As the wife of the Prime Minister, she was immensely popular with the public who respected her as a doctor and admired her quiet elegance, grace and dignity.

While everyone knew her public persona, little was known about her personal life. I had covered Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad extensively and had always wanted to write about her, too. Finally, with the help of her daughter Datin Paduka Marina, our long-time columnist, I secured the interview.

It was the first she had granted to a journalist, and I was excited and nervous in equal parts: here was a chance to get never-before revealed nuggets into the lives of the Prime Minister, his wife and their family and I didn't want to flub it.

Fortunately, I didn't and I had enough material for a two-part series which was published in *The Star* on March 4 and 5, 1996.

I wrote about her early years, how she and Dr Mahathir met as

Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali marks her 90th birthday with the release of her lively and delightful memoirs.



In her own words: Dr Siti Hasmah focuses on brief recollections, moments and impressions in her memoirs 'My Name is Hasmah'.

medical students – a wonderful love story that has lasted 70 years – his rocky road to prime ministership, their children and her values and thoughts on various issues.

But when we touched on a few

sensitive subjects, she asked me to be discreet about some of the details.

I had another coup when she granted another exclusive interview on the rather perilous and

exciting holiday she and Dr Mahathir had in the Antarctica and Argentina in 2002.

I would interview her again – when Dr Mahathir retired in 2003 – which allowed me to write about her one more time.

Fast forward to late May 2016. I received an e-mail from Marina's office asking me to save the date on July 20 for her mother's 90th birthday. Not only that, she would be launching her own memoirs on that day.

The birthday-cum-book launch with a pretty, floral theme, held at the amazingly creative event space called the Glasshouse at Seputeh in Kuala Lumpur, was a joyous love-fest led by her close-knit family in which we, the guests, were delighted to be part of.

All of us got a copy of the hard-cover memoirs titled *My Name is Hasmah*. I started reading it the moment I got home.

It's immediately engaging because it's very well designed and thought out.

There are lots of photos, listicles and whimsical illustrations (although I didn't think the one showing a dissected frog was necessary!) that match the cheerful-and-accessible tone of the writing.

In her introduction, Dr Siti Hasmah explains that rather than

write a full-blown "exhaustive account of every last detail of my life, I have decided instead to focus on brief recollections, moments and impressions that capture the truth of who I am".

And who is this woman? She reveals herself in six parts: as daughter and sister, doctor, wife, mother and grandmother, prime minister's wife and finally, as so-called retiree.

Some parts of the book are familiar to me as they recall my own articles on her but they are still a pleasure a read. Written in an informal and personal style, I felt as if I could "hear" her voice in those pages.

She covers much ground, including a brief and measured foray into friendships wrecked by politics, but predictably, the most interesting bits are on her relationship with Dr Mahathir.

Even though I knew their beginnings, she shares more details which are touching and romantic.

Dr Siti Hasmah, the only Malay girl in her batch of medical students at the University of Malaya in Singapore, struggled with her studies and she candidly shares that she "became known among my classmates as the girl who had to sit for exams every six months, repeating the subjects that I had failed..."

But it was because she had such difficulties that Dr Mahathir

Adventures and misadventures of Dr Siti Hasmah

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stepped in like "my knight in shining armour" to tutor her.

That was the start of their life-long love for each other, which is in Part 3 of the book, appropriately titled 'Sayang', meaning love in Malay.

How they dated and how Dr Mahathir confessed his love to her is so sweet that it could have been right out of one of my Korean dramas.

But he is, she writes, also exceedingly shy and avoids any display of affection in public. Even now, she adds, with her very poor eyesight, he would not hold her hand in public.

If Dr Mahathir is famous for his sarcastic sense of humour, Dr Siti Hasmah's wit is a lot gentler and self-deprecating. She shares many adventures and misadventures which are so funny, I laughed out loud.

One surprising revelation from the book is that Dr Mahathir is diabetic and asthmatic, although it is unclear whether he was so when he was prime minister.

Dr Siti Hasmah also writes about the adoption of their two youngest children, Mazhar and Maizura, in 1984 from Pakistan. It was an open secret but she asked me not to make public the details 20 years ago, possi-

bly because the two were still young even though they already knew of their adoption.

Throughout her long and eventful life, Dr Siti Hasmah seems to have a very clear sense of self. She has her own remarkable achievements as a government doctor and advocate for causes she believes in but her most important role was that of a supporting one to her husband.

To her, the Prime Minister's wife "was expected to be a role model, a positive influence, an inspiration to the people".

She adds that to do that, one had to "really take a good hard look at

yourself first". And the one quality necessary to fulfil the role is humility because "If you are humble, the people will accept you".

And that is the secret to her success and why she remains much loved, no matter how the political winds blow. Her name is Hasmah. Remember that!

Aunty finds herself very moved by this line in the book: 'I have osteoporosis, so if you hug me, please hug me gently.' My Name is Hasmah is available in all major bookstores at RM80. Feedback: aunty@thestar.com.my