

**Well Lit: Conversing Mahathir**  
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**By MEERA MURUGESAN**

Tom Plate chats with MEERA MURUGESAN about chatting with Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad

TOM Plate has a life that's worthy of a story so it's a little ironic that a man who's married to a former child actress, once spent a year studying to be a catholic priest and has met and interviewed many world leaders, has made it his career to highlight the interesting lives of others.

New York-born Plate, a seasoned American journalist, may not be a familiar name to the average Malaysian but that may change given the recent launch of his latest book, *Doctor M: Operation Malaysia Conversations With Mahathir Mohamad*, where he talks candidly with the former premier about everything and anything connected to Mahathir's 22 years in office.

Plate, whose syndicated columns on Asia have appeared in newspapers around the world since 1996, jokes that it was "one mistake after another" that led him to journalism.

"I couldn't decide what to do actually. I liked journalism but I kept telling myself I would do something more serious once I grew up but here I am," he says, laughing.

Now based in Beverly Hills or the "slums of Beverly Hills" as he cheekily puts it, with his wife of 31 years, Andre Darvi, he is putting his journalistic skills to good use in the *Giants Of Asia Series*, which began with a book about Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, published last year, and continues with the profile on Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Plate who has a degree in political science from Amherst College and a master's degree in public and international affairs from Princeton University is a career journalist who has interviewed many world leaders including Tony Blair, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and John Major.

From the beginning, Plate stresses that this book is not a traditional, long-winded political biography but what he describes as a "run up the mountain and down".

It's designed to be casual but intimate and in just 243 pages, he attempts to explain what it took for a man to run a country and for readers to gain an understanding of who Dr Mahathir is and how he thinks.

The book offers a view of Dr Mahathir the man, the politician and the prime minister and even captures his famous, wry sense of humour.

"It's a portrait in words of a political personality and the backbone of it is the dialogue," says Plate who spent about 10 hours with the former premier in five separate sessions.

During this time, he managed to get Dr Mahathir to discuss many key issues during his tenure, from freedom of expression and the controversial Operasi Lalang in 1987 to

affirmative action policies for the bumiputra, race relations in the country, religious freedom and extremism and even his alleged anti-semitism.

The opening line in the prelude of Plate's book, "love him or hate him, support him or fight him, worship him or damn him, he was a giant of Asia" is perhaps one of the few descriptions of Dr Mahathir that sums up the man well.

While there may be many who do not agree with every decision made by the former premier during his time in office, no one would deny his influence on the nation.

Plate says critics who claim this is a "suck up book" that paints a flattering picture of Dr Mahathir or that he was too soft in his line of questioning with the former premier either haven't read the book or don't understand it well enough. He says he gave Dr Mahathir a "fair shake".

"The value of a book like this is that it tries to put Malaysia in a larger context, to present where Malaysia is in the world today and undeniably, prior to Mahathir, Malaysia was nowhere."

As Plate points out in the book, Dr Mahathir played a key role in taking the country to the world stage.

Plate also says he doesn't believe the former premier lied to him during the course of their conversations although there may have been things he didn't want to say or things he couldn't say as they involved national security.

"Everything in this book is true and honest in a journalistic sense. He either said it or it really happened."

Some opposition politicians have recently denied that the former premier, who was also Home Minister, met them prior to the controversial detention and arrests under Operasi Lalang as claimed in the book. Dr Mahathir's claim that it was the police who were responsible for initiating the arrests had also not gone down well.

However, since the matter was raised, former Inspector General of Police, Tun Hanif Omar had come out to state that it was indeed the police who initiated the operation which led to the arrest of opposition leaders and activists, after a study of intelligence reports and taking into consideration circumstances in the country at that time.

Plate says at the end of the day, he can only present the facts but it's up to Malaysians to decide what they want to make of it. He adds that it's good that the book has drawn criticism and sparked discussions.

"If you write something that everyone likes, that just means your book is too bland," he says with a grin.

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