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FAREWELL, FUNNYMAN

Neil Humphreys says goodbye to his adopted home and insists that Singaporeans *can* have a laugh at themselves

ONE of Singapore's most popular columnists, Neil Humphreys has been keeping TODAY readers in stitches with his laugh-laced observations on the Singaporean way of life for more than four years.

While working first as a teacher and later as a journalist, the 31-year-old from Dagenham — a town just outside of London — somehow found the time to pen two popular bestsellers, 2001's *Notes from an Even Smaller Island* and 2003's *Scribbles from the Same Island*.

The books went on to sell a combined 35,000 copies, thus making him one of only a handful of best-selling authors here.

This month sees the release of Humphreys' third book, *Final Notes from a Great Island: A Farewell Tour of Singapore*.

TODAY sat down with the affable and straight-talking Englishman last week to discuss "Singaporean humour", his plans to leave his adopted homeland for Australia and his recent email correspondence with "God".

1 Your third book *Final Notes from a Great Island* is a rarity in that it combines travel writing and humour. Did you have any doubts about your decision to go that route? When I thought of doing it, people were telling me you couldn't write a travel book about Singapore because the country is too small.

But once you read the book, it becomes obvious that I'm not talking about the obvious places but more about the nooks and crannies and the *ulu* (remote) bits.

And I could've easily written three or four travel books on Singapore!

Sometimes, there is a tendency to overlook, and not appreciate, what is on your own doorstep.

But I'm pleased that I've touched on subjects that are important to me in this third book: The environment, heritage and history. I could've just made jokes about

my mother, I suppose, but she's already threatening legal action.

2 What are the pros and cons of living on this bejewelled isle?

I will never live in a country again where I can close my front door and be at a place like the MacRitchie Reservoir in 15 minutes, or go to a cinema, have food 24 hours a day and heaven knows what else: All within walking distance of home.

A nature reserve on my doorstep? I would have to be a millionaire to live that close to such greenery in England.

But the fact that these little subtle things are seldom appreciated can be exasperating. There is a "whacking culture" that is unfortunate but understandable: We live in a country where everything runs on time, no corruption, no political scandals. There are few major grievances. So, there is a tendency to get bogged down by minor gripes.

Taxi fares going up 10 cents is a concern but it's not the end of the world. A lot of the local news is mind-numbingly boring. It's not quite "cat stuck up in a tree" stuff, but it's close. That's a good thing. Pray that never changes.

3 It seems like you've had a decade-long love affair with Singapore. Why leave for Australia?

The same reason that brought me here: A love of travel.

I've lived here for 10 years and it was only meant to be a three-month holiday. My grandmother still goes on about how they never took 10-year holidays in her day.

I stayed here because it's a great, clean, green and safe country filled with warm, funny people. Cliches? It's the truth.

On my tour, I walked 27km in one day and never once left a forest, park or nature trail. That's hardly a concrete jungle. If Singapore was nothing more than concrete

and shopping malls, I wouldn't have lasted 10 weeks.

4 Some people would say "Singaporean humour" is an oxymoron. What's your take?

There used to be a lot of crap about Singaporeans needing to take this business of a sense of humour seriously. I once worked with kids and teenagers who were funny and self-deprecating and could stand alongside any of their peers in east London. Although they shouldn't stand too close, they'd probably get mugged.

I'm also proud to say that Singaporean humour has now gone overseas. I've had emails from people in Australia, Canada and the United States saying they've read the books. Even Bill Bryson emailed me recently.

He's the author of *Notes from a Small Island*, my original inspiration. That book on Britain sold millions and Bryson is one of the world's best-selling travel writers. It was like getting an email from God.

But he has my first book *Notes from an Even Smaller Island* — he liked the title and the cheeky homage. The idea that a book on aunts, Toa Payoh and void-deck funerals — quintessentially Singaporean things — is now in the hands of arguably the most popular travel writer on the planet is marvellous.

5 What's behind the ongoing popularity of your humour columns in TODAY?

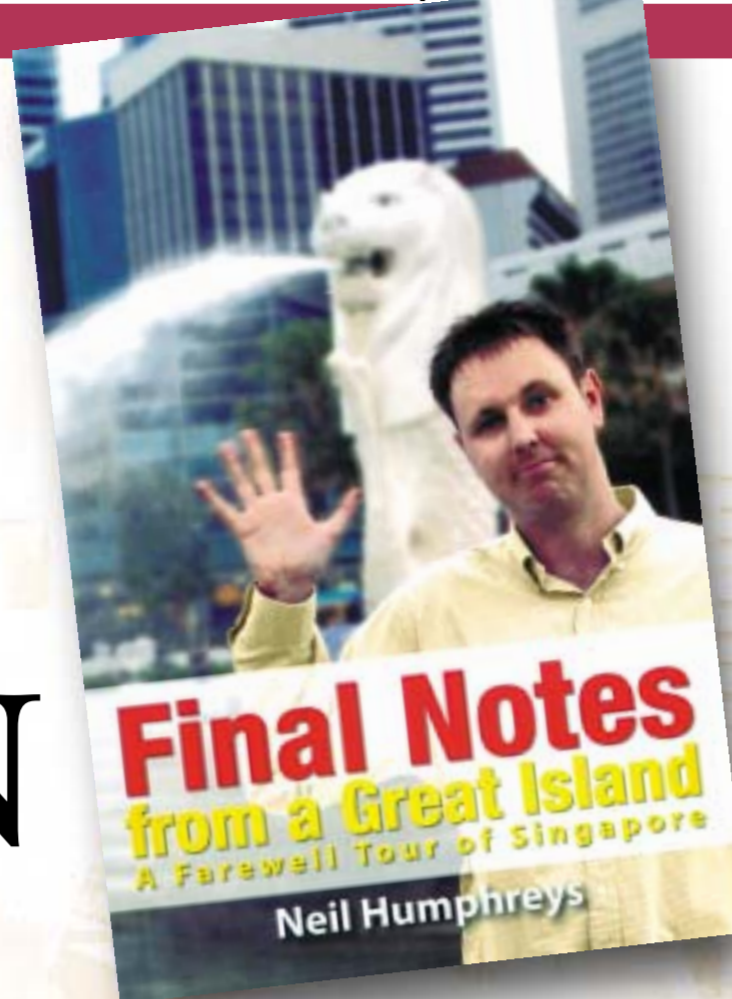
Well, I talk to all people. That's the way I am.

The habit comes from my mother who never stops talking. I like interacting with people from all walks of life.

If I see a gang of kids playing football on my void deck, I still join in. It drives my wife mad because I'm 31 now and people might think I'm Michael Jackson!



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6 Do you think your decade-long stay here has given you a unique perspective on the Singaporean way of life?

I'm often asked how Singaporean I feel and why I think I'm qualified to discuss local issues. It's a fair point.

But am I less Singaporean than those upper-middle class, monolingual types, who can only write two things in Chinese — their name and *gong xi fa cai* — and are often raised by maids, educated overseas and enjoy a rather pampered life?

Are they really more qualified to write about bread-and-butter issues that affect the average Singaporean?

Do me a favour!

Of course they have a valid voice but it's not the only voice here.

Unfortunately, it's a voice that often dominates the English-language media here and it's not always the voice of the so-called heartlanders.

7 How do you feel about your previous books?

There are some parts in the first book that sound naive and make me cringe now.

But I have some wonderful memories: Being called Mr Cuckoo Bird by my students, mistaking a void-deck funeral for a coffee shop and living with a landlady who flashed her boobs at me every Saturday.

The second book brought two audiences together: The ones who liked the Neil Humphreys who wrote the book and the ones who read the *ang moh* columnist

THREE'S COMPANY

NEIL Humphreys' third book, *Final Notes from a Great Island*, is an enthralling tour of Singapore's many hidden treasures and will surely silence critics who consider the Lion City to be, well, boring.

Armed with nothing more than his biting wit and a sturdy pair of legs, Humphreys heads off the beaten track and offers an alternative view of this diamond-shaped isle once infamously tagged as "Disneyland with the death penalty" by writer William Gibson.

Billed as a "valedictory tour from his Toa Payoh home", the journey takes Humphreys back

to his favourite haunts — from Sentosa to Sembawang and Choa Chu Kang to Changi — and includes run-ins with everything from wild crocodiles and mad cyclists to half-naked ice-cream vendors.

"This book shows there is more to Singapore than shopping centres and concrete," said the Englishman of his latest effort.

"On this tour, I encountered hitchhikers, transvestites, murderous dogs, dead cats — things you don't hear much about but they are here, at your doorstep. There's never been a travel book like this."

in Weekend TODAY.

But looking back, I might have done it differently. The first book was analytical while the second was mostly a collection of my humour columns and I ranted a bit in places.

So I'm very pleased with the third book because it's more balanced and objective.

8 As a humour writer, does it bother you that people probably won't ever take you seriously?

Not really. I attract different readers because my books are all different. The only link is, I hope, the humour.

The first book was social commentary, the second a compilation of humour columns and the third a travel adventure: How else would I come across a crocodile in Kranji or get harassed by prostitutes?

But it's the people who keep you going, keep you in a country. I know its clichéd, especially since Singaporeans are, apparently, at the bottom of the happiness index.

Maybe it's because I'm an *ang moh*, so people want to chat and know my life story. But the people here are forthcoming and priceless — from the Chinese auntie who comments on my height every single day to the Malay uncle who's increasingly stalking my wife!

If cynics still suggest strangers only talk to me because I'm a white novelty then so be it, I can't keep apologising for my skin colour.

9 *Final Notes from a Great Island* managed the rare feat of selling out its first run of 10,000 copies to stores almost immediately. You must be pleased that your observations remain a hit.

I had three little mantras while writing the third book: Don't be flippant, don't be rude and if there's no joke, don't force it.

I always try to tell it how it is and, having lived in two countries for so long, I think I offer a unique perspective. I lived

in England for over 20 years and Singapore for 10. So, I can contrast the cultures.

Take some recent local news: The shortage of beds at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. There was a bit of a public uproar. But the way I look at it, Tan Tock Seng Hospital is generally a decent hospital and usually efficient.

On the flipside, I once spent 10 hours in casualty waiting with a mate who was bleeding heavily after having a bottle smashed over his head in a London pub. Why? Because we grew up suffering from a crippled national health service and a crumbling welfare state.

That's where the different perspective comes in.

10 Now that you're off to terrorise the Aussies, what do you see as your legacy here?

What a loaded question! I'll just say there are a lot more humour columns now. When I started there weren't too many.

If anything, my columns and books prove that the notion that Singaporeans can't poke fun at themselves is bulls***. If it's fair, balanced and honest, Singaporeans will laugh at it.

So, if I'm remembered as that *ang moh* who sometimes made people laugh, that'll do for me.

WHAT: FINAL NOTES FROM A GREAT ISLAND BOOK LAUNCH AND SIGNING SESSION
WHEN: SATURDAY, 2PM
WHERE: KINOKUNIYA, Ngee Ann City

What is your take on Singaporean humour?
Email us at plus@newstoday.com.sg.

