

# Myanmar's authors reach new readers

By Zon Pann Pwint

"Is Myanmar a country in Africa or America? Is it an island in the Pacific?" Dr Uta Gartner says these were questions often put to her while studying *Burmanistik* (Burma Studies) at Humboldt University in the German capital Berlin.

She would often explain by saying Myanmar is situated northwest of Thailand — a common point of reference. This lack of knowledge about Myanmar drove Dr Gartner to have a series of short stories by Myanmar authors translated into German.

"Myanmar has its own unique culture and great works of literature which inspired me to let people in my country know about its culture, literature and Myanmar people," Dr Gartner says.

The result is *25 Zeitgenössische Kurzgeschichten* (25 Contemporary Short Stories) — the first collection of Myanmar contemporary short stories translated into German. This task was performed by Dr Georg Noack (whose Myanmar name is Tin Tun Nain), while Dr Uta Gartner edited the collection. The book, published by Mr Klaus R Schroder, will soon be released in Germany.

"Most people in Germany had no idea of the standard of Myanmar literature; there has only ever been one collection of short stories translated into German and that come out about 40 years ago. It was called *Bagan Zay* (Bagan Market) and included short stories by writers such as Zawgyi and Min Thu Win and others, however it is a rare book and cannot be found easily nowadays," she adds.

The 25 short stories by 24 writers, including Nu Nu Yi (Innwa), Pe Myint, Ma Sandar, Lae Twh Thar Saw Chit, Juu and many other well-known authors, first appeared in local magazines and publications and were then compiled into book form.

Dr Gartner says there is a wealth of knowledge that can be gleaned from Myanmar short stories that is incredibly useful to understand the social history of Myanmar people. This is because, she says, Myanmar short stories reflect real life — "the tradition of realism in Myanmar literature is now flourishing".

"[For example], one short story gives vivid descriptions of the fisherman's way of life, their problems and the society in which they live, [while] some portray rural and urban life," she says. "I believe the book will create more interest in Myanmar among German readers because it depicts Myanmar life and society in modern times."

One of the short stories — *53 Hma 13 Thot Alun Myittar Moe Kyi Phyo Phyo Thon* (From Bed 53 to 13, the Rain of Loving Kindness Pours Forth) — portrays the author's daughter's struggle in hospital with cancer.

Writer U Tin Oo, who goes by the pen name Kyuu Shin and has had more than 600 short stories printed in local publications, says he was surprised but happy to hear his story was to be released in a German language translation. "As a writer I have a small

but loyal readership, I am satisfied with my local readers but I am glad to hear — unexpectedly — that my story has been translated into German language. I hope, through these stories, that German people will come to understand Myanmar better," says U Tin Oo, who also works as a translator at *The Myanmar Times*.

The publisher, Mr Klaus R Schroder, agrees the purpose of the book is to provide a deeper understanding of Myanmar's contemporary literature to foreigners as often their experience of Myanmar is limited to renowned places, such as Bagan. He says he hopes the book can introduce foreigners to both Myanmar's way of life and its rich literature.

Dr Gartner says German people often have a very narrow view of Myanmar but there is limited scope in the German media to improve knowledge of Myanmar



Author U Tin Oo with a copy of the new German language book. Pic: Hein Latt Aung because most newspapers and magazines only focus on the political news.

"[German people] do not know much about Myanmar people; how they are cordial, how the culture is rich and how the standard of literature

is high and just the way the people think — I want to let my people in Germany understand better. To achieve

this I wanted to help publish short stories that are based on the writers' real experiences and are a faithful mirror of the lives and experiences of Myanmar," Dr Gartner said. Since studying *Burmanistik* (Burma Studies) at Karl-Marx University in Leipzig in 1963, Dr Uta Gartner has spent many years researching and studying Myanmar culture. She first completed a three-year diploma in Myanmar language and civilization study and then earned her PhD at Humboldt University in 1978. She says that although very few students study Myanmar language in Germany today, the culture, tradition and society constantly catch students' attention. Dr Gartner says that — if she can find the time — she hopes to translate more Myanmar novels into English, particularly *Thu Kyun Ma Khan Pyi* (We Shall No Longer Be Slaves), written by author Tekkatho Phone Nain.

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