Unwavering passion for poetry

Poet Grace Chia-Krakovic, who left Singapore in 1998, got married and became a mum, says her new book is on how life has changed

Poet Grace Chia-Krakovic deals with “daddy issues” and comes to terms with being a parent herself in her second collection of verse.

The mother of two completed Cordelia last year, when she was the writer-in-residence at Nanyang Technological University.

The book named after the devoted youngest daughter of Shakespeare’s King Lear was launched last month by Singapore publisher Ethos Books with an initial print run of 300 copies. It retails for $18 before GST and is available at Select Books, Books Kinokuniya and BooksActually.

The 39-year-old poet says the poems depict how her life has evolved over the past decade. “I’m not writing about buppie babies but I’m no longer this irresponsible person,” she says, referring to 1998 when she left Singapore for London to live with the new-found love of her life, Cirque du Soleil violinist Vuk Krakovic, now her husband.

“I was basically cohabiting with a guy, it’s a very reckless thing to do,” she recalls with a grin.

Like Lear’s daughter Cordelia, she is the youngest of three siblings — though she has two older brothers, not sisters as in the play, and her warm relationship with her housewife mother and accounts executive father meant that they handed her “a back-up credit card” as she left home, in case of an emergency.

She never used it. “Finances were so tight, I didn’t come back to Singapore for two years,” says the poet, who waitressed and did secretarial work to pay the bills. Her master’s degree in contemporary approaches to English studies from Goldsmith College, the University of London, was partly funded by a grant from the National Arts Council. She also has a bachelor’s degree in English literature and theatre studies from the National University of Singapore.

The year she left for London, non-fiction publisher Rank Books had just published her first collection of poetry, Womango. The title was a portmanteau of her gender and love of mangoes. The work ranged from “graceful and controlled” poems, well received by reviewers, to feisty but “flashy” verses that played with form in the vein of e. cummings’ punctuation-added poems.

She began work on her second collection immediately after Womango, but publication was delayed by marriage, motherhood and a nomadic lifestyle.

The needs of her daughter, five, and son, two, always came first, she says, declining to reveal their names. “I was a mother, I was very focused on that. Motherhood is very important to me — and I didn’t have a maid,” she says.

As her husband, also 39, toured Europe with Cirque du Soleil, Chia-Krakovic became a full-time housewife, packing up the family and switching cities practically every month.

She made time for commissioned projects that brought in extra income, such as a book about Mongolia for Times Publishing in 2003, and another on real estate agents for property agency Propnex in 2006.

She managed to put together a collection of poems as well seven years ago, but her then publisher — she declines to name the local outfit — asked for a substantial rewrite. She opted to sit on the verses instead.

Then the Nanyang Technological University offered her a one-year writer’s residency starting last year. The post is hosted by NTU’s department of English, in collaboration with the National Arts Council, and comes with a regular salary and up to $10,000 for research.

She leapt at the opportunity for a more settled life because it meant that her husband could take a sabbatical and spend more time with the children.

“And I really wanted to tell the stories that had evolved because of my nomadic life,” adds Chia-Krakovic. During the residency, she also completed a novel about life in a circus and is looking for a publisher.

When Ethos Books’ founder Fong Hoe Fang offered last year to publish her second collection of poems, she found herself ripping out and replacing many of the pieces.

“I had to throw out at least half of it. The verses were a bit juvenile,” she admits. “The poems were all about being in London, the anger, the anxiety, I just wanted to get away from that.”

So she began writing new poems on scraps of paper as she commuted from a rented home in the north of Singapore to the university campus in the west. Cordelia now includes poems about “daddy issues”, such as My Father’s House and My Father’s Method, about children who both love and rebel against their fathers, and poems inspired by her children, such as Der Grosse (The Great) and Daughter.

Then there are verses as Made In Singapore: iCordelia, inspired by recent frustrations as she makes ends meet in an increasingly expensive homeland.

All have been written with the idea that her children will eventually pick up the book and read it. “I have a responsibility to my kids. If they pick up my book, what would they be reading?” she says. “I want to say things in a meaningful way but still effervescing with energy.”

Half the poems Grace Chia-Krakovic had penned for her second collection, Cordelia, were replaced by fresh ones when Ethos Books offered to pick it up.