

Sure, they are nicer than the old '555' notebooks but what's the big deal about these ones that cost more than most paperback best-sellers?

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**W**HEN I spotted the sleek and handsome notebook, I was smitten.

The Moleskine (officially pronounced "mol-a-skeen'-a", though many opt to pronounce it as "mole skin"), as it is called, had a soft, black, oilskin cover, and its pages have rounded edges to prevent them from being dog-eared. An elastic strap can keep a pen firmly tucked in, and on the back cover is an inner pocket which is a handy place to dump ticket stubs, receipts and bits of paper.

It seems like a writer's dream notebook. Then I noticed the price tag: RM83.66. A notebook priced above RM80? What an audacious concept!

But Moleskines (with a price range from about RM30 to more than RM100) are considered the Rolls Royce of the notebook world not just because of its luxury pricing.

Its many enthusiasts (there are actually Moleskine fansites) say that the book is brilliantly designed and possess a "hip" factor that products such as iPods have.

Could its celebrity status be because it's touted to be the "legendary notebook" used by creative legends like Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso and Bruce Chatwin? (See *The skinny on Moleskine.*)

#### Moleskine advantage

Google "Moleskine" and chances are you'll stumble on fansites (such

# Mountain out of a mole(skine) hill



Rafiee Ghani's Moleskine is filled with sketches and notes. The artist keeps his Moleskine even after he has filled its pages, saying: "They are like my thoughts in writing."

as the very popular Moleskinerie at [www.moleskinerie.com](http://www.moleskinerie.com)) and numerous blog posts that praise the little black books.

Californian blogger Diane Patterson of *Nobody Knows Anything* writes: "I love my Moleskine. It's not just another notebook. It's an inspiration."

Although she calls Moleskine's legendary status "overblown (or outright made up) propaganda from

the manufacturer", she loves the notebook's qualities.

"The Moleskine notebook lies flat on the table, waiting for you to write or sketch something brilliant in it. The acid-free paper is fantastic for writing on.

"Cheap paper is rough, an impediment to the ballpoint. But Moleskine paper is smooth and lets your hand fly across the page.

"It has that pocket in back, so you

can keep receipts, movie tickets, love notes on cocktail napkins, photos of loved ones.

"And no matter how much you jam in that pocket, that elastic band around the notebook is going to keep the whole kit-and-kaboodle together — you won't lose anything."

Another blogger, science fiction writer Greg van Eekhout, says in his blog *Writing and Snacks*: "The



Rafiee Ghani draws and writes notes and reminders on his Moleskine.



# The skinny on Moleskines

WHAT do creative geniuses such as artists Vincent Van Gogh and Pablo Picasso and writers Ernest Hemingway and Bruce Chatwin have in common? They used Moleskine notebooks.

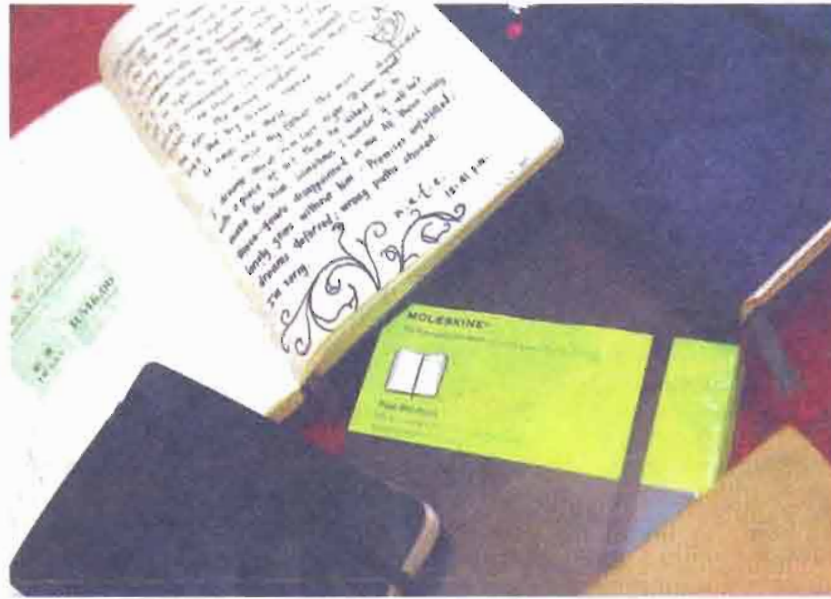
Or so claimed the Milan-based company, Modo & Modo, which produces them.

A curious if not impossible thing, questions an October 2004 *International Herald Tribune* article (*Does a Moleskine notebook tell the truth?*) since Modo & Modo was registered in 1996, long after these geniuses had turned to dust.

Francesco Franceschi from Modo & Modo's marketing department defended the Moleskine's historical heritage, saying that, "It's marketing, not science. It's not the absolute truth."

But it's notable that at the official Moleskine website ([www.moleskine.com](http://www.moleskine.com)), Moleskines are now touted as "the heir of the legendary notebook used by European artists and thinkers for the past two centuries."

Now, there is truth in *that* statement. The notebook used by the likes of Van Gogh and Chatwin was originally produced by a small French bookbinder which supplied the then nameless notebooks to Parisian stationery shops for more



Irmy Natasya's journal jottings in her Moleskine.

than a century.

Since these shops were often frequented by writers and artists, the notebooks soon became a favourite in the creative circles.

But in 1986, the manufacturer — owned by a family operating from Tours, France — went bankrupt.

The late English travel writer Bruce Chatwin was an ardent fan of the notebooks so he bought as many of them as he could before supplies ran out. He nicknamed them "moleskine" in his book *The*

*Songlines*. The French had called the notebook *carnet moleskine*.

(Curiously, when I speak to friends and family about Moleskine, I am often asked if the covers are made out of mole skins! And the answer is: no moles are murdered for the covers — the black covers are actually made from oilskin, cloth treated with oil to make it waterproof. The covers for a select variety of Moleskine notebooks, however, are made from cardboard.)

In 1998, Milanese publisher Mario Beruzzi brought back the notebook and christened it "Moleskine" (with a capital M). In that year, 30,000 Moleskines were sold. But in 2005, the figure became 4.5 million, so much so that Beruzzi put up Modo & Modo for sale in 2006 as "(Moleskine) became too big" for his company, which had only 13 workers then.

It was eventually sold to a French company for 60mil euros (about RM304mil).

Today, Moleskine is a worldwide phenomenon, thanks to enthusiastic customers who help spread the word via blogs and forums.

According to Alvin Chen of CzipLee, there will be 19 different types of Moleskines to choose from next year, including a full leather limited edition.

Moleskine was officially introduced in Asia in early 2005 by stationery distributor, Working Unit.

The directors of Working Unit, who are French, were regularly stocking on Moleskine notebooks during their trips to Europe. When they discovered that there were other Asians buying Moleskine notebooks on their trip abroad, they decided to bring it to Asia.

According to Working Unit, the sale of Moleskine in Asia doubled last year while Malaysian Moleskine sales have grown four-fold compared with 2006. — *E.T.*

Irmy Natasya doesn't mind paying extra for quality.

Moleskine, as it turns out, is not a decadent pleasure akin to a cigar and cognac in a big leather club chair in front of a roaring fire surrounded by walnut panelling and paintings of mallard ducks. Rather, it's an extremely useful tool. It fits comfortably in a pocket (pants or shirt), the elastic band holds a pen firmly in place, and it's just the right size for comfortable writing."

## Malaysian fans

But would Malaysians pay top dollar for an empty notebook?

"I had no hesitation in getting it — even if some people say that it's too pricey for a notebook," says Fajar Aidu, 30, a lawyer based in Kuala Lumpur.

She uses her three Moleskine notebooks to keep track of her appointments, to write down ideas and notes and even keeps one as a journal.

"The price may be high but it's durable and handy. When you chuck it here and there, normal notebooks get torn easily. But I've not had any problems with Moleskine notebooks no matter where I chucked them," she says.

Her friend Irmy Natasya Mohamed, 31, who converted her into a Moleskine fan, agrees.

"People pay extra for quality,

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whether for handbags, shoes or gadgets. It's the same for Moleskine," says the KL-based business writer who started using Moleskine notebooks a few years ago after a friend from Madrid introduced it to her.

"There's just something very alluring about Moleskine," she adds.

Says Rafiee Ghani, a 45-year-old artist based in Shah Alam: "Unlike other books, Moleskines have to be judged by the cover, the paper quality, the overall design, and of course, the character of the notebooks."

Rafiee, who has been using Moleskines for over a decade, uses a pocket-sized Moleskine, and he has a larger one which he slips into his bag to sketch, draw maps and write notes or reminders.

But his Moleskine isn't just a functional tool - Rafiee, for one, does not throw them away even after he has filled its pages.

No wonder, as some pages from his Moleskine look like works of art! In fact artists around the world pose their "Moleskine art" on the website, 'skine art at [www.skineart.com](http://www.skineart.com).

"They are like my thoughts in writing," he explains.

"(When people discover that I use Moleskines) they are often shocked by the price but they also notice how passionate I am about it. And once they have it, they want to keep writing something in it," he says.

### Quality rules

"I think it has to do with the quality of its paper," says Kinokuniya merchandise supervisor Abbie Hiew when asked about the allure of Moleskine. (Kinokuniya has been bringing in Moleskine notebooks since May, 2007).

"The ivory, acid-free papers which are exquisitely bound are not only classy but a must-have especially for people who have important things to keep, and intend to keep them for a long, long time.

"Besides, try touching the oilskin cover, and you will know how nice

# Moleskine club



Jason Chen of CzipLee

it feels - especially the soft cover ones! And the little pocket at the back of the notebook - isn't it adorable? Honestly, if you put aside the money factor, the majority of us wants to own a Moleskine!" she says.

Still, when brothers Jason and Alvin Chen brought Moleskine notebooks into the Bangsar branch of their family-owned bookstore, CzipLee, in late 2006, they had doubts.

Although the two were Moleskine enthusiasts themselves, having been introduced to them while studying Australia, they were sceptical if Moleskine could do well in their then newly opened bookstore.

"After all, we have not sold such expensive pieces of blank paper before!" says Jason, 29, with a laugh.

But after receiving numerous requests for them, they decided to take the risk.

Their first order of Moleskine - just a box - "hit the ground running", Alvin, 27, says.

"We have a lot of die-hard Moleskine enthusiasts coming to our store now," he says. "For example, one customer drives down from Penang to our store just to stock up! There's also a local Moleskine 'club' called MyMole who regularly comes to our store."

Although they were not the first to carry Moleskine, they were probably one of the first to carry the full range. The most common complain

among Moleskine enthusiasts is that they can only get a limited range in Malaysia.

Jason and Alvin believe that the secret behind Moleskine's success is its consistency and high quality.

"The worst thing that could happen is to go into a bookshop to get a new notebook, only to find out later that they don't make them like that any more," says Jason.

"With a Moleskine, you get the same quality - every notebook is handmade and has been carefully checked for defects. Also, once you've filled the pages, they really look nice lined up on a shelf," he says.

Moleskine, they say, have built a very good reputation for the "durability, quality, functionality and consistency of their products."

"That's why people choose to buy Moleskines even though there are cheaper options and imitations out there," says Jason.

Alvin likens buying a Moleskine to joining a club.

"And membership starts at RM30," he says, grinning.

### Just a fad?

But not everyone is convinced. "Moleskine is just another fashion fad," sniffs a commenter in the blog post *The Monster Monster Collection of Moleskine Tips, Tricks and Hacks* ([freelanceswitch.com/productivity/the-monster-collection-of-moleskine-tips-tricks-and-hacks](http://freelanceswitch.com/productivity/the-monster-collection-of-moleskine-tips-tricks-and-hacks)).

"Great, useful notebooks have been around for ages and in a broad variety of styles and structures (and still are!). Much like Starbucks coffee, iPods and Mac laptops, Moleskines are part of the uniform of the supposedly unique, creative, independent thinker of today ... with the environmental issues the planet is facing, the indiscriminate use of paper should be going out of fashion..." she concludes.

When a friend gave Esmeralda Koh, 33, a self-confessed "notebook

## Best-sellers

FOR week ending July 13, 2008:

### Non-fiction

1. *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne
2. *The Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch with Jeffrey Zaslow
3. *A Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela
4. *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* by John Gray
5. *1434: The Year a Magnificent Chinese Fleet Sailed to Italy and Ignited the Renaissance* by Gavin Menzies
6. *The Law of Attraction* by Michael J. Losier
7. *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* by Eckhart Tolle
8. *The Art of Talking to Anyone* by Rosalie Maggio
9. *It's Not How Good You Are, It's How Good You Want to Be* by Paul Arden

10. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey

### Fiction

1. *Playing for Pizza* by John Grisham
2. *The Lost Duke of Wyndham* by Julia Quinn
3. *Evening is the Whole Day* by Preeti Samarasan
4. *Where Rainbows End* by Cecelia Ahern
5. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini
6. *Thanks for the Memories* by Cecelia Ahern
7. *If You Could See Me Now* by Cecelia Ahern
8. *Quickie* by James Patterson
9. *World of Warcraft: Beyond the Dark Portal* by Aaron Rosenberg
10. *Secrets of Surrender* by Madeline Hunter

Weekly list compiled by MPH Mid Valley Megamall, Kuala Lumpur; [www.mphonline.com](http://www.mphonline.com).

addict", a 13 x 21cm 18-month Weekly Moleskine Notebook recently, she loved it immediately.

"My pen seem to sail over the paper," says the writer.

"It also inspires me to jot down my notes and thoughts on it. More than once I'd get a nice idea for a story I want to write, decide I'd record it later when I have the time, only to forget that brilliant idea at the end of the day! So the book helps someone who is too lazy to keep a diary to maintain a habit," she says.

But she was absolutely stunned

when she found out that her notebook costs nearly RM80!

"The most expensive notebook I've bought was a RM45 journal by Paperblanks ([www.paperblanks.com](http://www.paperblanks.com)). But the cover has a mother-of-pearl-like finish," she says.

To her, Moleskine notebooks do not look impressive enough to justify the price tag. After all, there are cheaper alternatives, she reasons.

"I'll get a cheap notebook or write on toilet paper if I'm desperate. Didn't J.K. Rowling write on napkins once?" she asks, tongue-in-cheek.

**Free!**

Be among the first 10 people to take this coupon into **Kinokuniya Bookstores** at **Suria KLCC today** and receive a moleskine diary worth RM80 **free!** This offer is valid only on **July 20, 2008**, or while stocks last.

You can also get a 25% discount on all moleskine products at Kinokuniya Bookstores with this coupon until **Aug 3, 2008**, or while stocks last.

This coupon is not valid with other promotions and is not exchangeable for cash. One coupon is valid for only one moleskine diary or one discounted moleskin product. Only original coupons will be accepted.