LONTAR

Lontar Newsletter

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Greetings from the Executive Director

Nadiem Makarim, Minister of Education and Culture, seems to take pleasure in shocking fellow Indonesians, particularly conservative-minded parents and educators with his out-of-the-box suggestions on altering and improving current schooling and learning methods.

At the recent Indonesian Millennial Summit, he exhorted participants to give children comic books as a first step towards developing a reading habit. Judging from the critical comments in the media that followed, clearly not everyone approves, particularly those who regard comics as trashy reads and not real literature.

I would be the first to disagree, luckily having been brought up by parents who strongly believed that reading anything was the basis of a good education and who brought home comic books for their children to read every week. Their message was clear: reading is supposed to be an enjoyable experience, not something that is forced—educational yet entertaining.

In addition to comic books, my siblings and I also read illustrated versions of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Gulliver's Travels,* and other titles published by Classics Illustrated. Over time, we graduated from these graphic books to texts without illustrations. The experts may be right: comic books can help younger readers to better understand narrative concepts, story structure, and character development.

In Indonesia, the comic book genre began during the pre-independence era, with political cartoons complementing early periodicals. Soon, enterprising artists like

Ruminations by John McGlynn:

Underclass

In September 1970 when I began college at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, it was as a Fine Arts and Theater major—a choice for which I was underprepared, especially when compared to my classmates, all of whom had graduated from large urban schools where a career in the arts was deemed to be a viable, even noble, goal, and "the arts" were a well-funded part of high-school curricula. Not so at Weston Union, the lonely, one-storey school on a barren hill halfway between the two-street towns of Cazenovia and Lime Ridge, where I and the other students were urged to pursue vocational careers.

At Weston, "Home of the Silver Eagles," whose student body numbered no more than 200 during the years I was there (1966–1970), most boys chose as electives such subjects as Automotive Mechanics and Farm Management. Girls opted for Home Education, Consumer Economics, and the like. For extracurricular activities, participation in a sports team and membership in the F.F.A. (Future Farmers of America) were the primary choices for boys. Girls were in the school's Glee Club or the F.H.A. (Future Homemakers of America). I was an atypical male

On August 1, 1992, three days after the Australian premier of *Cockroach Opera* on July 28 at Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney, friends of Teater Koma and Lontar were hosted at the home of Ian and Dewi Fraser in Melbourne. From left to right: Nano Riantiarno, Peter Barnett, Ian Fraser, Siti Nuraini Barnett, Goenawan Mohamad (partially visible), Barbara Hatley, Adila Suwarmo, Ratna Riantiarno, JHM (crouched), Lanita Idrus, Dewi Anggraeni, Umar Kayam, Brian Belcher (squatting), Fikri Jufri.

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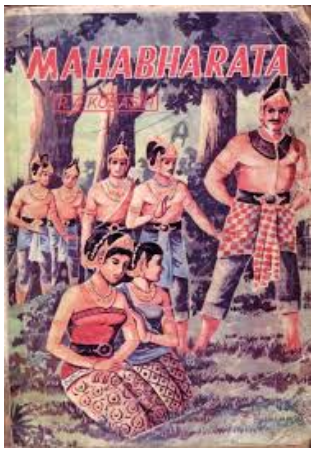
R.A. Kosasih discovered the value of turning legends from the Javanese classic *Mahabharata* epic into entertaining visual storytelling. During his lifetime, Kosasih published 40 series of comics based on stories from this classic epic, which were eagerly devoured by readers all over the country. There have been other artists since, but Kosasih contributed strongly to the growth of the Indonesian comic industry, which today has been enriched by influences from other countries, such as the Japanese manga comics.



While some may argue against comics becoming main stream, there is no question that comics have generated great interest among artists and writers who have developed their own ideas of storytelling. A few Indonesians now contribute illustrations for the well-known publishers DC Comics and Marvel Comics. While comics may not be the core output at Lontar, we have produced one title *The Furniture Salesman Who Became President*, an interesting commentary on local politics. Visit Lontar's office to pick up this book and a large array of other books in translation.

As we venture into the new year, we wish you all the best in the months ahead and thank you in advance for your continued support and contributions.

Yuli Ismartono
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student. Typing, Spanish, and Art were among my electives and as for extracurricular activity, while I did participate in sports—Wrestling!—I also joined the school's very small clubs that were devoted to drama and forensics (i.e., argumentative discourse).

Being one of the few males in these clubs meant that there was almost always a slot for me in performances and events but it also meant that I was often cast in roles far beyond my ken and acumen: orating a speech by Robert Ingersoll on free thought and humanism; enacting James Thurber's masterful monologue, *The Night the Bed Fell*, (in which I forgot my lines half way through); reenacting the role of Teddy in *Arsenic and Old Lace* which Cary Grant had popularized on screen; and performing as Romeo, 95-pound weakling that I was, to a ravishing Juliet who would have spurned my affections anywhere but the stage. Despite the poverty of my performances, it was through this activity I came to more greatly appreciate the art of drama and the power of the spoken word.

Very soon after my arrival in the big city of Milwaukee, I became aware of the fact that, in socio-economic terms, I was a member of the underclass—a farm boy whose parents were unable to provide any financial assistance and who, unlike my classmates, had to work nights and weekends just to make ends meet. When shelving books in the bowels of the U.W. library as part of my work-study program, I often recalled my father's imprecations against shady statesmen and the well-at-heel who conspire to keep the "have-nots" in place. Until that time I had not realized that my father abjured the status to which he'd been cast within the larger socio-economic sphere and that it had been for that reason, perhaps, that he had raised his children to believe that with a curious mind and the will to work hard, there were no obstacles one could not overcome.

So it was that with my penchant for drama and as a draft-age male vehemently against the war in Viet Nam, I became a diehard fan of Berthold Brecht, whose play *Mother Courage and Her Children* is definitely one of the greatest anti-war plays of all time. I avidly read English translations of Brecht's work; drove across the country, from Milwaukee to New Haven, with a trio of Brecht-besotted friends just to see the first U.S. production of his 1929 play, *Happy End*; and, in 1972, enthusiastically accepted the offer to play a role in a local production of *The Threepenny Opera*. Brecht's plays, with their thumb-in-nose attitude towards authority and blatant support of the underclass, struck an immediate cord.

A decade later, in July 1982 I went one night to Taman Ismail Marzuki to see a performance of *Time Bomb* (*Bom Waktu*), a new play by Nano Riantiarno. Watching the play, I saw in the script a bit of Shakespeare—the play is partially a love-story and the leading characters are "Roima" and "Julini"—but a lot of Brecht as well. This tragicomedy, populated by members of the underclass—prostitutes, transsexuals, migrant workers, and thieves—and self-serving public officials as well, told me that the playwright was on the side of the underclass, an assumption confirmed

Author of the Month

Titis Basino P.I.

Titis Retnoningrum Basino or **Titis Basino P. I.** (Magelang, Central Java, January 17, 1939) graduated from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Indonesia in 1962. She began to write when she was in high school. She was a flight attendant for Garuda Indonesia. In the 1960s, her short stories often appeared in *Sastra* magazine. Her short stories depict the lives of educated women that take surprising turns when measured against the moral standards of the time. Her short story "Meja Gambar" was translated as "Drafting Table" by Claire Sivensen and published by the Lontar Foundation. Two of her stories, "Rumah Dara" and "Lakilaki dan Cinta," were published by H. B. Jassin in *Angkatan '66*, and "Suatu Keputusan" was chosen by Satyagraha Hoerip to be published in *Jakarta: 30 Cerita Pendek Indonesia*. This last story also received an award from *Sastra* magazine. After a long silence, Titis began writing again and published a novel, *Pelabuhan Hati* (1978). Her other novels include a series: *Dari Lembah ke Coolibah* (1997), *Welas Asih Merengkuh Tajali* (1997), *Menyucikan Perselingkuhan* (1998) and *Mawar Hitam Milik Laras* (1999). She received an award from the Center for Language Advocacy and Development for her novel *Dari Lembah ke Coolibah* in 1998 and the Mastera Award for Literature from the Malaysian government in 1999.

for me the following year when he staged his adaptation of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* under the title *Opera Ikan Asin*, and then reaffirmed time and again in the years ahead when Teater Koma, his drama troupe, bravely raised issues on stage that were not being given sufficient coverage in the mass media: presidential tenure (*Suksesi*), ethnic discrimination (*Sampek Engtay*), bloated government bureaucracy (*Opera Sembelit*), nepotism (*Konglomerat Burisrawa*), the plight of the marginalized (*Opera Julini*), and many more.

Since the time Nano established Teater Koma in 1977, the company has forever been at the forefront in the struggle for a more egalitarian Indonesia and, with the unflagging assistance of Nano's wife and partner, Ratna Madjid, is today one of the most popular and long-running theatrical companies in Indonesian history. I am honored to have worked with Nano and Ratna several times, starting in 1992 with the publication of *Time Bomb* and *Cockroach Opera*. In 1994, I subtitled Nano's television screenplay, *Onah and Her Dreams* (*Onah dan Impiannya*), whose subject was a new underclass, i.e., victims of AIDS. Most recently, in 2018, Teater Koma participated in Lontar's "Hadhrami Festival," reading segments from the play *Fatimah*, whose focus is women's rights.

As Berthold Brecht demonstrated through his companion plays, *Der Jasager* and *Der Neinsager*—*The Yes-Sayer* and *The No-Sayer*—there will always be different points of view, but I would like to think that as Nano has done on stage through Teater Koma, I have attempted to do through Lontar, giving voice to the underclass, in this instance, Indonesia's literary underclass because, in terms of global literary reach, Indonesian literature does indeed fall in that category. This is not for of lack of quality but as no doubt my father would have pointed out, for lack of curious minds and the very hard work that it takes to change engrained conditions.

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Book of the Month

The Lontar Anthology of Indonesian Short Stories (2 Volumes)
Editor: John McGlynn, Zen Hae, Andy Fuller
Book order: contact@lontar.org

January Activities

Lontar recently held meetings with PTFI and Cenderawasih University in Jayapura to discuss holding a writing workshop in this Papua provincial capital next February. The workshop will feature published writers sharing their knowledge and experience with students and aspiring authors in Papua, raising their potential in contributing towards local literature and culture, which will be accessible online.

Lara Norgaard's essay "Putu Oka Sukanta and the Hidden Wounds of World History" was awarded runner-up in *Asymptote Journal*'s annual essay contest and published in the journal. In the words of contest judge J. M. Coetzee, "Lara Norgaard makes a compelling case that [Putu Oka Sukanta's] work should not be judged by Western aesthetic standards, which prize the fully achieved single art-work, but rather should be read in toto as the record of an evolving meditation on Indonesia in our times."

https://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/lara-norgaard-on-putu-oka-sukanta/

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Putu Oka Sukanta and the Hidden Wounds of World History

Lara Norgaard on Putu Oka Sukanta

Putu Oka Sukanta does not fit the western image of a celebrated author. The writer lives in a simple house, tucked away on a surprisingly calm alley in industrial East Jakarta. He receives journalists and fellow writers in his home and writing space, which doubles as a traditional medicine organization and an acupuncture studio. It is not the kind of office with book-lined shelves and a large desk piled high with papers and poetic scraps; instead, herbal treatments line the counter by the front door and a large acupuncture table dwarfs a simple writing desk.

Read bio

Lara Norgaard is an editor, journalist, and translator. A graduate of Princeton University (B.A. comparative literature), she founded and directed Artememoria, a free-access, English-language arts magazine focused on the memory of Brazil's civil-military dictatorship, and served as Editor-at-Large for Brazil for *Asymptote* from 2017–2019. Her nonfiction reporting can be found in publications such as *Agência Pública* and *Princeton Echo*, her literary

Quotes of the Month

The emergence of women writers after the revolution reflected the continuing development of the short story form. Titis Basino explored the inner world of women with special emphasis on several issues. Titis Basino, in her story "I Saw Her Smile," plunges into the value of a mother in a child's life with issues of accepting a mother who lives in a mental asylum.

I SAW HER SMILE

By Titis Basino
Translated by
Marjorie Suanda

I couldn't stand to see my mother naked in a public place, a place that was foreign to me. The mother who didn't know her child. The child who had made her insane.

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