Greetings from the ED

Eager to make up for the learning losses incurred by the crippling Covid-19 pandemic, the government is going all out to ensure schooling around the country resumes as quickly as possible. Despite continuing concerns over the lingering Omicron variant, which even seems to affect children over five years of age, students have begun to flock back to classrooms. As a cautionary measure, some schools only hold classes three days a week. But there is a palpable air of optimism as the government gets serious about a recruiting drive aimed at hiring one million more teachers. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research & Technology recently announced 700,000 openings for this year alone. Last year, 300,000 new teachers were employed. The good news is that local governments have been promised a dedicated budget to cover teachers' salaries by the Ministry of Finance. If nothing else, the prospect of a tenured teaching position, along with a government contract that guarantees perks and pension plans, is bound to attract better qualified teachers.

The most exciting development in the education field is the government’s decision to introduce the Merdeka (“Freedom”) Curriculum, which will be applicable starting this year for schools from early-childhood learning-centers all the way to secondary schools. The new and modern

Ruminations

Higher and Higher

Beginning in the 1970s most musical records began to be recorded in stereo, a much more expensive format than mono. As a result, the cost of a long-play record almost tripled in price, rising to an average of US$ 6, the equivalent of US$ 31.29 today. In 1974, when the minimum wage was US$ 2 per hour and I was earning only that amount as a typewriter-cleaning assistant and delivery man for the Stemp Typewriter Company on State Street in Madison, Wisconsin, I had to limit my purchase of records to no more than one or two a month and only releases by favorite singers. One such singer was Rita Coolidge who had, with Kris Kristofferson, just won a Grammy Award for their rendition of the song, “From the Bottle to the Bottom,” on their album, Full Moon. I’d play that record while doing my homework.

A class I was taking in that spring semester of the 1973-1974 school year at the University of Wisconsin was “A Survey of Indonesian Culture.” As taught by Toenggoel Siagian, a man of Toba Batak descent, the course was dissimilar to others in that its focus was not on Java as the center of the Indonesian archipelago but on cultural elements and social attitudes that were common among the various ethnic groups of Indonesia.

One of Toenggoel’s lectures was devoted specifically to the architecture of the traditional Batak Toba house. Their images, thrown on the screen by his Kodak Carousel Projector, revealed fantastic looking dwellings. Especially prominent were their steeply-pitched saddle-back roofs and sharply-projected triangular eaves. Toenggoel pointed out that the front gable of the Toba Batak roof is higher and extends further outward than the rear gable. Further, while the panel beneath the front gable is often finely carved and painted with motifs of suns, stars, roosters, and geometric motifs in red, white, and black, the rear gable remains

A traditional Toba Batak home. (Photo by “Yanajiny3” from Wikimedia.)
curriculum has already undergone a trial run in 2,500 selected schools and offers a simpler but more intense method of teaching, focusing on the three main topics Indonesian students are weak at—mathematics, reading, and science. In fact, Indonesia’s average ranking across the three subjects is 65 out of 69 countries, according to PISA standards. The percentage of low performers in science among disadvantaged students is among the highest in the world. The Merdeka Curriculum differs from the highly-regimented 2013 curriculum in that it provides teachers more flexibility in structuring, designing and adapting lessons and classes to capture and retain student interest, particularly in developing soft skills and analytical thinking. The new program also gives secondary school students a wider choice of subjects, rather than limiting them to majoring in either science-based (IPA) or social science-based (IPS) subjects. Hopefully, it will also prevent early dropouts, which in 2020 was estimated at 1.13 percent among high-schoolers.

To prepare for this challenge, the ministry has provided a mobile application called Merdeka Mengajar (“Freedom to Teach”), especially created to guide and help educators in implementing the new curriculum. The app provides numerous references for learning materials and learning modules and is an interactive platform designed for program exchanges among the teachers. Those who have a slow internet service—or none at all—are being given USB disks containing relevant training modules.

We at Lontar are supportive of any project that would spur the students’ reading habits which would hopefully lead to increased interest in the arts and literature and in our case, to more publication of books. Thank you for your continued support in our mission.

Yuli Ismartono (yismartono@lontar.org)
“Well, that’s a satria,” I ventured, “and he appears to be on a stage.”
“You’re warm,” Richard told me, “but try English instead.”
“Well, a satria is a ‘knight’ I answered, “but I still don’t get it.”
“Then try its homonym,” said Kevin who then, impatient as ever, supplied the answer himself: “It’s ‘A night at the Opera,’ you dummy!”

Still not quite understanding, I opened the envelope and found inside two tickets to a concert featuring Rita Coolidge who was scheduled to appear at the Mandarin Hotel for a one-night-only show on December 20. I let out a small gasp of delight.

When the night of the concert came around, my partner and I headed to the Mandarin with another friend, an English teacher by the name of Paul Trigg who happened to be a friend of Dick Coolidge, the singer’s brother, whom he had gotten to know when they were teaching English at King Saud University in Riyadh, several years before. Paul told us that he had met Rita at the hotel the day before and had taken her on a whirlwind tour of the city and that she had invited him and his friends to join her in her suite after the concert. Another small gasp!

At the concert that night Ms. Coolidge sang many of her most well-known songs, the most famous of which was arguably “Higher and Higher,” a rhythm and blues song first made popular by Jackie Wilson in 1967 when I was still in high school and living under my parent’s wings. When hearing her sing the lines “Your love keeps lifting me, higher and higher / Higher than I’ve ever been lifted before,” my mind jumped back to Toenggoel’s comment on the desire of one generation for the next and to my parent’s constant urging to learn but then, as well, to the element not mentioned by either my teacher or my parents which is stated in the lines of that song—that it is love, only love, that will raise one to a higher place

After the concert, Paul, my partner Wim, and I did indeed go to Ms. Coolidge’s suite where, after flutes of champagne, I invited her to my house for further conversation. To my surprise, she accepted the invitation and I spent the next few hours with her and friends. From left to right: Paul Trigg, Wim Soeitoe, Rita Coolidge, Jerry Chamberland, and JHM.

John McGlynn (john_mcglynn@lontar.org)
Toni Pollard

Toni Pollard, a Sydney-based teacher, fell into a new career as literary translator after the first Ubud Writers and Readers Festival in 2004 where she presented a translation of a Gus tf Sakai story at a literary magazine launch. Here she met Putu Oka Sukanta who urged her to translate his novella, Above the Day-Below the Night. This coincided with retirement from Western Sydney University after a teaching career spanning 38 years, and translation became a new way to employ her language skills.

Toni then went on to translate Mirah of Banda (Hanna Rambe), Departures (Nh. Dini) and Night's Disappearance (Gus tf Sakai) plus numerous short stories. At the same time, Toni was translating regularly for the annual UWRF anthologies, and for publishers Mizan and NouraBooks, notably Moon’s Son by children’s author Djokoleono and Benny Arnas’s Faithful. Contributions to publications for Frankfurt and London Book Fairs included authors Clara Ng, Mona Sylviana, Rio Johan, and samples of works by Marah Rusli, and Seno Gumira Ajidarma.

Toni’s passion for translation and Indonesian literature led to founding Indolitclub in 2018 with former Lontar executive-director Kesty Pringgoharjono. Now a thriving forum of monthly Zoom discussions of selected bilingual texts, Indolitclub has attracted Indonesianists and authors from far and wide.

Surat dari Pejompongan

IWAN, 2

Kawan Moer,


Bahkan pada tokoh Pak Sastro dalam Kooong (1975).

Tentu saja Pak Sastro bukan Tokoh Kita, bukan pula pelukis yang menjadi tukang kapur tembok permakaman, tetapi sejatinya mereka sama atau kurang-lebih sama. Tokoh-tokoh itu telah dirasuki oleh semacam semangat kebebasan yang menolak kehidupan yang cenderung membelenggu jiwa. Rumah, keluarga, lingkungan sosial, kampung, semua itu adalah penjara untuk jiwa yang hendak bebas.

Untuk itu, manusia harus menemukan takdir kegelandanganannya di dunia ini: bebas, sendiri, mencari tanpa pamrih menemukan.

Pada tokoh Pak Sastro—satu dari sedikit tokoh utama fiksi Iwan yang diberinya nama—pelucutan semua ikatan-ikatan itu dimulai dari bencana dan kematian. Istri Pak Sastro mati ditelentikan kampung; anaknya si Amat pergi meninggalkannya sendirian dan kemudian mati diditabrak kereta. Sebenarnya, dengan kematian dan kehilangan ia telah dilepaskan dari ikatan-ikatan sosial yang membelenggunya selama ini: keluarga.

Lantas, muncullah tokoh perkutut yang tidak bisa berbunyi—alias perkutut gule.


Dalam novel ini proses pengembaraan dan pencarian itu—apakah ia didorong oleh kerinduan atau rasa bersalah—adalah wabah. Pada mulanya wabah itu menimpa Pak Lurah: ia tergerak mencari Pak Sastro. Lantas orang-orang kampung yang merasa bersalah kepada Pak Sastro juga ikut-ikutan mencari Pak Sastro.

Jika pun kemudian Pak Sastro sudah tidak ambil peduli kepada perkututnya yang hilang itu, bukan berarti pengembarnaannya akan berakhir. Justru ia akan memulai pertualangannya yang baru, sebab sekarang ini ia merasa lebih bahagia ketimbang saat hidup di kampung bersama banyak orang. Itulah komunalitas yang teramat menganecam individualitas. Sampai di sini Iwan menggemaikan kembali kata-kata Sartre: “Neraka adalah orang-orang lain.”

Dengan problem pencarian akan kebebasan yang tampa ujung itu, Kooong sebenarnya sebuah novel remaja yang salah sasaran. Dalam hal ini Iwan telah menantang kaum remaja untuk membaca sebuah karya sastra yang di dalamnya tidak ada satu pun tokoh dan problematika dunia remaja yang bisa diidentifikasi oleh pembaca yang disasar novel ini. Dengan tesis dasar yang kurang-lebih sama dengan tesis dasar novel-novelnya yang lain—yang tidak dikategorikan sebagai bacaan remaja—Kooong sejatinya adalah novel dewasa.

Tetapi, Kawan Moer, Iwan adalah Iwan.


Bagiku, Iwan hanya kurang berhasil mengemuk hasratnya untuk masuk ke dalam dunia fiksi yang sebenarnya ia mesti memakai dirinya sebagai pengarang yang banyak membaca. Ia harus menyerahkan kendali cerita kepada si narator dan tokoh-tokoh di dalamnya, kepada dunia fiksi secara keseluruhan. (Zen Hae, zenhae@lontar.org)

Many tears have been shed since the morning of Saturday, February 19, when Gregory “Greg” Churchill expired at Mayapada Hospital in Ciputat, following a period of close to one month in intensive care. He was 74 years old. Greg wrote Lontar’s original bylaws pro bono and, serving as he did on Lontar’s board for years thereafter, the sadness now felt by Lontar’s current board members and staff is especially keen.

Born in 1947 Greg grew up in Kenmore, New York, and Hamden, Connecticut. As an undergraduate he studied at Cornell University after which he pursued a law degree at Harvard Law School from which he graduated in 1975. Having previously traveled in Indonesia several years before and been smitten by Indonesia’s allure, he returned to Indonesia in 1976 and lived here since.

Greg is widely known in Indonesia’s legal-, NGO-, and cultural circles for his in-depth knowledge of Indonesian law and culture; his never-ending generosity; his humble and unassuming manner; and his marvelous wit. Greg was a large man in life but one whose heart was even larger and he will be sorely missed by both his Indonesian and American friends and families.