



Lontar Newsletter

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June, 2024

Greetings from the ED

While public debate on education has lately focused on the budget to be allocated for this sector by the incoming government, the role of libraries and community reading rooms in promoting much-needed literacy in the outer regions has also been gaining considerable media attention. In this regard, a movement by non-profit organizations and private donors to foster more interest in reading, particularly in low-income urban areas and the country's remote regions, where books and reading materials are inaccessible is of significant interest. The World Bank's assessment that 53% of 10-year old students (or about 13 million primary school students) in Indonesia are unable to read or understand a simple text, might be attributed to the reason behind this movement. This is not to say, of course, that libraries are non-existent in the country. According to the National Library of Indonesia, there are 164,610 libraries nationwide, including 42,460 public libraries, 6,552 academic libraries, 2,057 special libraries, and 113,541 school libraries.

Despite the numbers just cited, there appears to be low usage or interest in the existing libraries. Experts have noted that in the 20 years Indonesia has participated in PISA (the Program for International Student Assessment) student reading scores have improved little if at all. UNESCO ranks Indonesia as second from the bottom in terms of world literacy—a sorry state, indeed! Based on figures from UNESCO, for every 1,000 Indonesians only one person is an avid reader. What might be the reasons for this? Obviously, “inaccessibility” in poor and remote areas is one but experts say that the

Ruminations

Poetics 1: Peripeteia

When I was a student at Weston Union High School (1966–1970) the student population numbered no more than 225 in any one year. Thus, when it came to extracurricular activities, of which there was a fair number of choices for such a small school, it was a buyers' market for students, with little competition except in the field of sports. And it's true.... Looking at group photographs in my high school year-books, only athletic-related activities attracted the largest share of the student body: football, wrestling, and track & field for boys, and G.A.A., the intramural Girls' Athletic Association, for girls.

Unsurprisingly, given the school's rural location, next in popularity were F.F.A. (Future Farmers of America) for boys and F.H.A. (Future Homemakers of America) for girls. A close third for both genders was F.B.L.A. (Future Business Leaders of America), an enigma to be sure because very few Weston students actually aspired to starting businesses of their own. (Most who did contemplate life after high school imagined taking over their parents' farms or going on to a nursing or vocational school.) The reason students chose F.B.L.A., myself included, was because a perquisite for membership was a free weekend at Rice Lake Resort and Convention Center in northern Wisconsin where the association's annual conference was held.

Much lower on the list were “Quill and Scroll,” comprising students who put together school newsletters and its annual year-book, and the Library Club, whose main activity was helping Miss Hendricks, the librarian (who suffered from cerebral palsy) to re-shelf returned books. Both groups had few male participants.

At the bottom rung was “Forensics,” the speaking and debate club which included among its aspiring elocutionists those few students who participated in the school's dramatic ventures. Here again, few males chose to join this pursuit but in a school where popularity among carriers of the Y chromosome was more often measured by touchdowns, baskets, and runs-batted-in than by a person's GPA or articulateness—and at a time when I was the proverbial skinny kid on the block, with scant athletic prowess but the ability to lean into a katabatic wind at a 45-degree angle and remain upright—“drama” was a means of raising one's profile and attracting peer attention.

libraries themselves fail to present themselves as attractive places of learning and sources of information.

More importantly, teachers and educators must take a more active role in promoting libraries as a support tool in promoting literacy programs and, with that, the socio-economic development of their surroundings. In the absence of full-fledged libraries, reading rooms or reading gardens can provide a similar function, particularly when it comes to fostering interest among children and youths in reading. It is heartening to see such informal establishments, mostly run by education activists, cropping up around the country. Hopefully, the increasing number of libraries and reading rooms will serve to raise Indonesia's standing among other countries.

Lontar stands ready to support these efforts and we will count on our friends and donors to help us in our mission.

Yuli Ismartono (yismartono@lontar.org)



Members of the 1968 Weston High School Forensics Club. Row 1: Jane McGlynn, Gloria Carrahar, Constance Prouty, Nancy Gher; Row 2: Mary Hasse, Kathy Brandt, JHM, Marcella Daniels. Row 3: Steven Johnston, Shirley Emerson, Susan Rockweiler, Jenny Shehan.

Not that I had a much acting acumen but I did have two things going for me: one being the ability to memorize large chunks of text, an acting prerequisite (a skill I'd honed at St. Anthony's grade school where duties as an altar boy included the memorization of the Latin Mass and all its prayers) and the other being my gender. Ignoring the fact that no other males were competing against me for dramatic roles, thus it was I was offered the leading male roles in Weston's theatrical productions. One year, I was Shakespeare's Romeo. (So what if the forensics judge asked the director, "Couldn't you have found somebody other than a choir boy to play the lead?") Another time, I was Teddy in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, a role was made famous by Cary Grant in the play's filmed version. (Now who would you rather see? Cary or me?!)

After high school, in my first two years as a Fine Arts and Theater major at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, I continued to participate in theatrical productions, both at the university and elsewhere, but very quickly realized that life as a leading-man was not in the cards for me—which is why I was delighted when, by happenstance, I discovered the world of *wayang kulit*, Indonesia's shadow puppet theater.

Regular readers of this column will know that thereafter I set my sights on becoming a puppeteer, towards which goal I spent the summer of 1973 at the University of Washington in Seattle where I studied shadow theater technique with Ki Oemartopo and then transferred to the University of Wisconsin in Madison where I changed my major to Southeast Asian Studies in the second semester of the 1973-1974 school year.

In the summer of 1974, I took First-Year Intensive Indonesian at ISSI, the Indonesian Summer Studies Institute which U.W. hosted. To my chagrin, I didn't do particularly well, especially when compared to my

AUTHOR OF THE MONTH



Seno Gumira Ajidarma, 2017

SENO GUMIRA AJIDARMA, author of more than 30 books of short stories, essays, journalism, novels, graphic novels and plays, is one of Indonesia's most distinctive and influential voices. His range is immense, from comic urban sketches to the searing prose of *Eyewitness*, which along with *Jazz*, *Perfume and the Incident* confronts the New Order government's treatment of East Timor.

Born in Boston in 1958, son of a faculty member of the Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Seno rebelled early against formal schooling and, between junior and senior high school, ran away from his home in Java to work briefly in a Sumatran *krupuk* (shrimp cracker) factory. On his return he became involved in experimental theater and began writing. He published his first poem in *Horison* at the age of 18. Later he completed an undergraduate degree in cinematography and graduate degrees in philosophy and literature even while contributing regularly to newspapers and magazines.

Among his numerous literary prizes are the Southeast Asia Write award (1997), multiple Khatulistiwa (Equator) Literary Awards (2004, 2005), the Pena Kencana (Golden Pen) Award (2008) and several Best Short Story of the Year awards from the national newspaper *Kompas*, most recently in 2010.

classmates, most of whom were either linguistics majors or had already spent some time in Indonesia. In Second-Year Indonesian, however, which I took during the 1974-1975 school year, I began to catch up with my fellow students and by the end of my study of Third-Year Intensive Indonesian in the summer of 1975, I was at or near the top of my class and had decided to study *wayang* performance technique in Java.

Serendipitously, later that year, John Wolff, professor of linguistics at Cornell University and author of *Beginning Indonesian*, sent an announcement to the U.W. Center for Southeast Asian Studies, where I was now working as secretary, that in the summer of 1976 an Advanced Indonesian Language Study Program was to be held at the Teachers Institute in Malang (IKIP-Malang). Ten students from around the country would receive full scholarships to participate in this trial program. I immediately applied and subsequently was accepted.

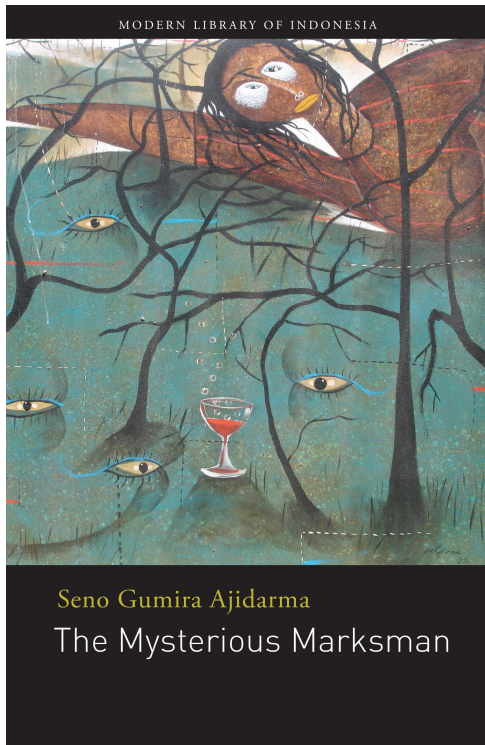
Around that same time, I had also applied for a Fulbright research scholarship to study *wayang* performance technique in Yogyakarta during the 1976-1977 U.S. school year and, shortly after my arrival in Indonesia in May 1976, when the Cultural Affairs Officer at the U.S. embassy informed me that my application for a Fulbright scholarship had been approved, I was in 7th Heaven. My dream was near fruition.

After finishing the Advanced Indonesian course in Malang, I would go directly to Yogyakarta. With savings from the "Malang scholarship" I had enough funds to get me through the end of the year and, now, with the promise of a Fulbright scholarship, I would be setting pretty for the following 12 months to come. Further, by the time I'd finished my study one year hence, I would be well on my way of occupying center stage again, this time as a shadow master. But then, in August, Donna Culpepper, the cultural affairs officer, contacted me again: Indonesia's Ministry of Education had revoked my scholarship—officially, the reason being, because I was already in Indonesia.

In a dramatic work, this sudden reversal in circumstances is called a peripeteia, a turning point which (on stage, at least) most often results in a negative reversal of circumstances. Was that the case. Certainly, I thought so at the time.

Some choices in life, we make ourselves, others are made for us. For the former, we have ourselves to blame or credit. As to the latter, their outcome is for us to determine as well.

John McGlynn (john_mcglynn@lontar.org)



The Mysterious Marksman

By Seno Gumira Ajidarma

Translated by Joan Suyenaga

The stories in *The Mysterious Marksman* deal with despair—sometimes tender, sometimes absurd, sometimes grotesque. They touch on moments in the lives of people—assassins, office workers, abandoned wives, children—each struggling to deal with precious memories of the past, bewildering scenes in the present and alarming changes of an uncertain future.

Surat dari Pejompongan

MANUSIA KAMAR

Kawan Moer,

Aku barusan membaca lagi *Manusia Kamar*. Itu adalah kumpulan cerpen Seno Gumira Ajidarma yang diterbitkan Haji Masagung (penerbit yang sebelumnya bernama Gunung Agung) pada 1988. Jika kita membaca buku ini, kita akan menemukan sesuatu yang agak berbeda dari cerpen-cerpen Seno yang lebih kemudian. Bahkan, fiksinya secara keseluruhan. Begini penjelasanku.

Melalui buku ini kita akan melihat betapa kuatnya jejak kerja kewartawanan Seno. Enam belas cerita dalam buku ini ditulis disela-sela kerja Seno sebagai wartawan. Bahkan, beberapa dari cerpen itu menceritakan kilasan-kilasan kehidupan wartawan ibu kota—beberapa dari mereka malah menampilkan nama-nama yang kita tahu hidup dalam dunia kewartawanan. Termasuk juga—maaf-maaf—kebiasaan wartawan di masa lalu yang gemar mengunjungi tempat pelacuran.

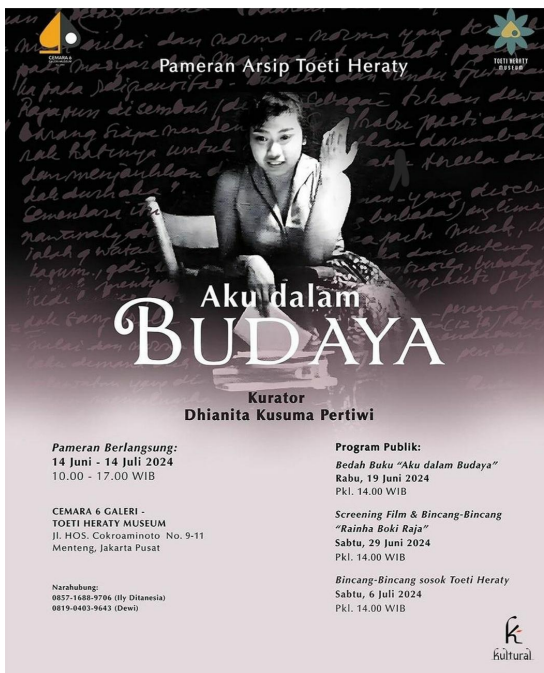
Kerja kewartawanan memberikan bekal yang cukup untuk Seno melukiskan peristiwa dengan perincian yang kuat. Katakanlah semacam lukisan realistis tentang satu keadaan dan perasaan manusia yang bergolak di sebaliknya—dalam cerpen “Nyanyian Sepanjang Sungai” misalnya. Gaya lukisan realistis seperti ini sudah mulai agak ditinggalkan pada cerpen-cerpen Seno yang lebih kemudian.

Kenapa begitu? Kukira karena Seno kemudian lebih memilih model lukisan adegan dan peristiwa yang surrealistis, penuh keajaiban di sana-sini, yang mengaburkan batasan antara dunia dongeng dan kehidupan sehari-hari. Peristiwa ajaib seorang kekasih merobek senja untuk pacarnya—sebagaimana diceritakan dalam “Sepotong Senja untuk Pacarku”—adalah kecenderungan umum dalam cerpen-cerpen Seno yang lebih kemudian.

Seno lantas mendapat cap kuat pada kemahirannya yang terakhir ini. Jika ada satu cerpennya dalam *Manusia Kamar* yang menjadi cikal-bakal dari semua ini adalah “Ngesti Kurawa”, tentang seorang pemimpin rombongan wayang orang yang lenyap dalam kobaran api yang menghaguskan tobongnya. Di sini Seno mulai mengaburkan batas-batas antara dunia wayang yang penuh citra kepahlawanan dan kesucian dengan dunia keseharian para pemain wayang orang yang bangkrut dan perselingkuhan di antara mereka.

Di luar itu, boleh dibilang, Seno masih mencoba-coba bentuk. Sesekali ini menjajal cerita-cerita realisme, tetapi di kali lain, ia mendesak begitu banyak peristiwa dengan daya jukstaposisi sebagai imbalan atau jeda dari masalah yang tengah menimpa si tokoh. Dan peristiwa-peristiwa yang dijejerkan itu adalah peristiwa jurnalistik yang menjadi makanan empuk kaum wartawan.

UPCOMING EVENT



AN EXHIBITION OF TOETI HERATY'S PAPERS – “CULTURE AND I”

Throughout her life, Toeti Heraty contributed significantly towards the world of culture. Her ideas and her thinking on arts and culture have been published in a number of books, articles and academic papers, among them a book titled *Aku Dalam Budaya* (Culture and I). Originally a thesis to fulfill a requirement towards her doctoral degree—she was the first Indonesian woman to have been awarded such a degree—the writings were published in book form in 1984 and 2013. Her thoughts and ideas will be commemorated once again on the occasion of the third year of her passing, as part of an exhibit titled ‘Culture and I’. The event will take place on June 14 until July 14, 2024, from 10.00am until 17.00pm, at the Cemara 6 gallery of the Toeti Heraty Museum, located at Jl. HOS Cokroaminoto No. 9-11, in Menteng, Central Jakarta. First opened on June 14th, the exhibition will remain open to the public until July 14.

For further information visit Instagram @cemara6galerimuseum

Yang juga sudah mulai ajek menjadi fokus perhatiannya adalah masalah kriminalitas—soal yang kemudian ia eksplorasi secara maksimal dalam *Penembak Misterius* (1993) dan *Saksi Mata* (1994). Bacalah cerpen “Matinya Seorang Wartawan Ibu Kota”. Sebagaimana judulnya, kali ini yang menjadi korban kekerasan adalah seorang wartawan. Atau, ia mematenkan seorang nelayan dengan sebab musabab yang misterius dalam “Cerita dari Sebuah Pantai”. Atau matinya seorang penari telanjang dalam cerpen berjudul sama.

Namun, semua kekerasan itu baru bernilai politis ketika aktor kejahatan itu dipindahkan dari kaum kriminal perkotaan kepada aparaturnya negara. Itulah kenapa *Saksi Mata* menjadi penting dalam kompleks kekaryaan Seno. Ia memberikan warna lain dalam representasi kejahatan negara dalam sastra Indonesia modern. Ia memasukkan anasir dongeng dan keajaiban untuk membuat semua peristiwa kejahatan negara itu menjadi mungkin. Ini kemudian diperkuat oleh semacam credo, yang diturunkan dalam sebuah buku *Ketika Jurnalisme Dibungkam, Sastra Harus Bicara* (1997).

Terkait kejahatan Orde Baru di Timor Timur ini, Seno praktis tampil sendirian. Apa yang dilakukan Seno terasa sangat aktual, hangat, menyentak. Ia seperti mendorong ke depan kasus-kasus kekerasan negara yang lain. Tidak terkecuali Tragedi 1965-1966 yang kemudian diolah lagi oleh para pengarang kita setelah Reformasi. Ya, diolah lagi, sebab sebelum Seno, ada beberapa pengarang telah menulis tentang Tragedi 1965-1966, meski gaungnya tidak sekuat apa yang terjadi setelah Reformasi.

Seno menulis di waktu yang tepat. Sementara, pengolahan tema Tragedi 1965-1966 terasa sebagai ulangan. Tetapi, yang memulai ataupun yang mengulang, tetaplah penting toh. Sebab, jika tidak, apa yang dialami oleh kawan-kawan di jalur kiri—lenyapnya satu generasi manusia Indonesia—tidak akan bisa diketahui oleh generasi sekarang. Itulah kenapa sastra dengan tema politik—apa pun itu—menjadi penting.

Tapi, bukan melulu karena muatannya ya, Bung. Cara menulisnya juga. Ini yang sering diabaikan. **Zen Hae** (zenhae@lontar.org)

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