



# Lontar Newsletter

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December, 2024

## Greetings from the ED

It's too early to tell exactly where the Indonesian education sector is heading under the new government of President Prabowo Subianto but there have been a number of changes that could lead to a radical transformation of that sector. One in particular is the division of the former Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology into three separate ministries: Basic and Secondary Education, Higher Education, Science and Technology, and the establishment of a completely new Ministry of Culture. Another shocker is a reversal of the controversial policy of eliminating annual exams as part of the Freedom to Learn (*Merdeka Belajar*) policy introduced by former Minister Nabeli Makarim.

One encouraging development is what appears to be renewed interest by the government in developing a "reading culture," especially in rural and remote areas. Partially towards achievement of that goal, the education budget was increased by 8.9% to become Rp. 665.02 trillion in 2025. Further, President Prabowo has reiterated more than once that his administration's top priority, next to food security, will be the improvement of children's education in all of Indonesia's 38 provinces.

The problem of illiteracy has long been recognized as the biggest deterrent to national development efforts. According to a study by the Innovation for Indonesia's School Children (INOVASI), a collaborative program between the Australian and Indonesian governments, 43% of grade two students failed a basic literacy test.

## Ruminations

### The Conversation Pit

When I was younger, let's say at the cusp of my teens in the mid-1960s, it was the cramped kitchen in my family's home at Glynnspring where on holiday weekends especially, when the "older girls" were home from university, siblings would convene for conversation—even though the dining room (whose table and chairs could accommodate our rat pack) was just off the kitchen and the living room (with its complement of davenport, rockers, and ottomans) was just beyond.

Were the metal stove and kitchen sink magnets, I do not know, but it truly was as if we, the siblings, were covered with metallic shavings, because it was always the kitchen to where we were drawn after supper and where we ended numerous evenings listening to the week's top ten on WRDB from Reedsburg, WRCO from Richland Center or, if we were lucky and the connection was good, from WLS-AM 890 in Chicago.

While Kathleen was washing the dishes, Mary was drying, and Jane was putting away the bowls, plates, and silverware, we'd sing along with Petula Clark as she warbled "Downtown," lip-sync "You've Lost that Lovin' Feeling" when the Righteous Brothers came on, and doo-wah-doo-wah when the Supremes belted out, "Stop! In the Name of Love."

After the number one hit of the week had played and the dishes were done, we'd then pop a dishpan's worth of corn and, after slathering the bacon-grease-fried popped kernels with melted butter, compete to be the first in the juiciest news department about mutual friends and foes: "Did you know that Nancy and Chuck HAD to get married?" "It's hard to believe a good Catholic like Marge would marry a Lutheran!" "Those Jessup boys are going to fry in hell for ripping off Mrs. Milfred at her general store." And so on and so forth. Such were many of the nights in my teenage years....

Fast forward 25 years. It is now 1990 and I am no longer in Podunk, Wisconsin, with a population of 300, give or take a few uncounted souls, but am, instead, in the mega-city of Jakarta with more than 8 million inhabitants.

My home in Pejompongan, Central Jakarta, is a modest affair, a one-story edifice with approximately 125 square meters of useable space, including a small kitchen, two bedrooms, a front room—the *satpam* room, rarely used except for formal meetings with local security officers and

To rectify this problem, the central and local governments alongside community groups recently set up Public Reading Rooms (*Taman Baca Masyarakat*), administered by the Directorate-General of External Education. As of 2023, some 2,388 reading rooms were registered with the forum. These reading rooms are set up in local libraries, classrooms, and public meeting halls. The idea is to make them easily accessible to the public. The onus now falls on the government to regularly supply them with books and digital reading materials.

Two years ago, the government also initiated the Indonesia Literacy Festival which is to be held annually around the country and include a variety of events such as book exhibitions, writing competitions, poetry readings, and interactive discussions on a variety of topics.

Lontar stands ready to assist in such efforts to foster a reading culture. We thank all our donors who have supported us in this endeavor and we extend the very best wishes for a peaceful and prosperous 2025.

Yuli Ismartono

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ward representatives—a plant-filled back terrace, a combined dining-living area whose circular table seats no more than six people comfortably, and, curiously, a rectangular sunken area, 3.5 x 3.5 meters in diameter, and 30 cm. lower than the floor.

Apparently, this area in the back right corner of the house had once been a decorative fish pond but, forever unable to hold water (except in times of flooding) had, by previous tenants, been converted into a sitting area—a “conversation pit,” as it were. After I moved in, I covered its base with woven-mats, lined its sides with oversized *lurik*-covered cushions and hung plants above the pit and paintings on its side walls. Much like the kitchen at Glynnspring, the conversation pit became the place to which guests gravitated after dinner and where we would enjoy post-prandials and conversation.

One night it might be members of the literati circle lounging on the cushions: Subagio Sastrowardoyo, Toeti Heraty, and Taufiq Ismail talking about the upcoming launch of *Walking Westward in the Morning* in London. Another night, fellow culture vultures discussing plans for KIAS (Kesenian Indonesia di Amerika Serikat), the massive moving exhibition of Indonesian art and culture that toured the U.S. in 1990-1991. On yet another night, former political prisoners Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Hasyim Rachman, and Joesoef Isak were filling the air with *kretek* smoke while trying to guess just when in the hell Soeharto would fall. Then, there were nights of more gaiety as well, with the film crowd: Christine Hakim, Niniek Karim, and Tuti Indra Maloan, among others. And, of course, amidst and between all these more formal events were numerous spontaneous evenings for sundowners with journo friends—Vaudine England, Claire Bolderson, Margot Cohen, and the like—as well as “pre-bar” gatherings with “the boyz,” when we’d sip on Ararat brandy before making our way near Cinderella hour to the Tanamur for late-night dancing.

Those were good times. How refreshing it was for everyone to be able to speak and be listened to. So passed many evenings and nights in my middle years.

Fast forward yet another 25 years and we come closer to where I am today, a position in which I am just a wee bit older than I was in the



Subagio Sastrowardoyo and Toeti Heraty

## FEATURED AUTHOR



AS. Laksana

(Source: Goodreads Indonesia)

**AS. (Ahmad Satya) Laksana** (Semarang, Central Java, December 25, 1968) writes short stories, essays and literary reviews. He studied in the Department of Indonesian Language at the Institute for Teacher Training and Education (Institut Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan/IKIP) in Semarang (currently Semarang State University), but he did not graduate. He continued his studies at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, graduating from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences. He founded a forum and published the magazine *Gorong-Gorong Budaya*. He was also a journalist for *DeTik*, *DeTak* and the tabloid *Investigasi*. He founded a school for creative writing in Jakarta and taught there. His short stories have been collected in *Bidadari yang Mengembara* (2004), *Murjangkung: Cinta yang Dungu dan Hantu-Hantu* (2013)—both of which received awards for Best Literary Work in *Tempo* magazine—and *Si Janggut Mengencingi Herucakra* (2015). He published a novel, *Cinta Silver* (2005), which was adapted from the film; a collection of essays, *Podium DeTik* (1995); and a textbook on writing, *Creative Writing: Tips dan Strategi Menulis Cerpen dan Novel* (2007). Several of his short stories have been included in anthologies of the best stories published in *Kompas* newspaper (1996, 1998, 2010). He also received the Golden Pen Award (2008, 2009).



Clockwise from top center: Jajang C. Noer, Roger Tol, Itje Tol, Susanne Siskel, Alan Feinstein, Jennifer Lindsay, Rachel Cooper.

previous scene. My home is different now. In 1998, I purchased the house in Pejompongan that I'd been renting for the previous 15 years and then, in 2004, tore it down and built a new two-story gallery-like home to better display the artwork I had collected over the years.

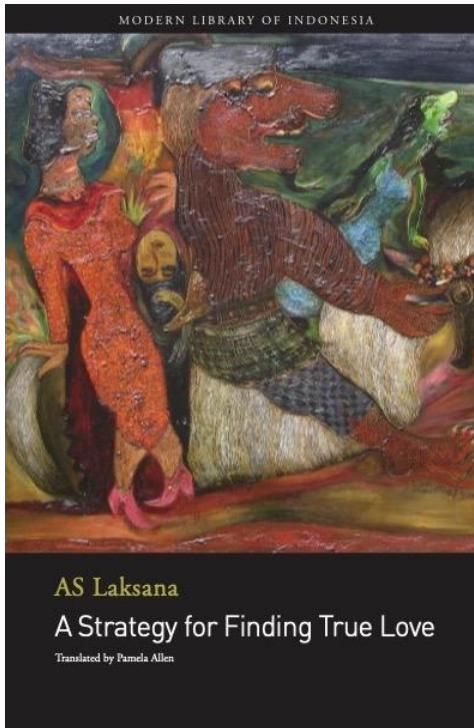
Thinking I might be able to use existing walls for the new structure (and thus save on construction costs), when working with an architecture on the design the new house, I insisted that we retain the same foot print of the original structure for the ground floor. My mistake! In the end the old walls proved to be too porous and not strong enough for further use. But, at this point, the footprint could not be changed and the area that had been the conversation pit became a light-filled atrium with a rock garden at its base.

Gone were the days of lounging on cushions in the conversation pit after dinner. Instead, when weather permitted, my guests and I now gathered on the open-air terrace off the living room on the second floor. Less nimble than in decades previously, I and my equally aging friends now preferred to sit on rattan chairs or settee when engaged in conversation.

I am fortunate to have had in my life that kitchen at Glynnspring, the conversation pit at my “old house” in Pejompongan, and the second-floor terrace of my new home—each of them a place for free and unfettered communication with family members, old friends, and, over the years, countless new acquaintances.

When Virginia Wolff wrote her masterly essay, “A Room of One’s Own,” she was referring to the need for a space, either actual or symbolic, where women could step away from the obligations of wifehood and motherhood society places on women. Only by having their own “room,” she argued, could women achieve literary equality. Ms. Wolff was right, of course, but there is a parallel for the rest of us as well and, as this year ends, I wish only for each of us to be able to have a place where we can politely exchange points of view and to be respectfully listened to.

John McGlynn ([john\\_mcglynn@lontar.org](mailto:john_mcglynn@lontar.org))



While the stories in this anthology are in and of Indonesia, they are more than tales about Indonesia. To read them is to be taken to unexpected places in time and space. Indeed they often seem to transcend time and space. AS Laksana explores the nature of human relationships and seeks to reveal what it is that connects us as humans and what it is that makes us have to disconnect. The stories range in style from gritty realism to domestic drama to flights of fancy, and take us from the early days of Dutch colonialism to modern Indonesia. Notable for the prevalence of feisty female protagonists, the stories also feature a cast of eccentric and sometimes elusive characters, from hapless rulers to inept magicians to bereft lovers to the enigmatic Everyman character Seto. Told in uncompromising, sometimes brutal, language, these stories remind the reader that, difficult as they might be, relationships are at the heart of the human condition. When relationships fail, when communication breaks down, things fall apart.

## Surat dari Pejompongan

### AUTOBIOGRAFI

Kawan Moer,

Beberapa hari lalu, di sebuah lapak buku bekas Pantai Kencana, di depan pasar Asemka—langgananku sejak masa kuliah—aku menemukan buku *Soeharto: Pikiran, Ucapan, dan Tindakan Saya* (1989); sebuah autobiografi Soeharto sebagaimana dituturkan kepada G. Dwipayana dan Ramadhan K.H. Buku ini diterbitkan oleh PT Citra Lamtoro Gung Persada, perusahaan milik Siti Hardijanti Hastuti (Tutut), anak sulung Soeharto. Perusahaan ini pula yang dulu menerbitkan buku berseri *30 Tahun Indonesia Merdeka*—buku-buku yang menampilkan sejarah Indonesia sejak Kemerdekaan secara bagus-bagus saja.

Sebenarnya, aku sudah tahu buku ini sejak lama, tetapi baru kali ini aku tergerak untuk mengoleksinya. Sebagai bagian dari anak-anak Indonesia yang tumbuh besar di masa Orde Baru, tentulah aku paham kenapa autobiografi Soeharto itu ditulis. Sebagai sebuah narasi, autobiografi adalah cerita dari sudut pandang orang pertama, saya. Tujuannya adalah untuk menampilkan, ya itu tadi, pikiran, ucapan dan tindakan seorang saya, dalam hal ini adalah daripada Soeharto.

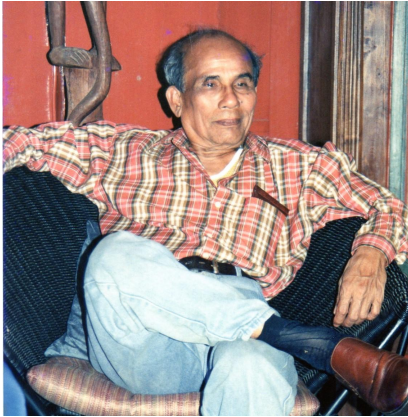
Sebuah autobiografi sangat bisa jadi adalah sebuah pembelaan diri. Katakanlah, jika kelewat banyak waham tentang seseorang dan itu bisa menyesatkan orang awam, maka sebuah autobiografi perlu tampil untuk memberikan semacam klarifikasi atas salah sangka atau salah paham awam terhadap si saya—apalagi jika si saya itu orang penting. Dengan autobiografi maka sebuah salah paham awam mendapatkan klarifikasi, dengan harapan salah paham atau salah sangka itu segera sirna dan awam mestinya bisa berprasangka baik kepada si saya yang sudah menulis autobiografi itu.

Tetapi, bagaimana jika si saya itu adalah Soeharto? Orang yang tercatat sebagai presiden paling lama (32 tahun) dalam sejarah politik Indonesia modern—mengalahkan Sukarno yang sekitar 20 tahun—dan paling banyak pula kecaman terhadapnya—di samping puja-puja terhadap prestasinya selama menjadi penguasara daripada Orde Baru.

Jika kita membaca buku tersebut, maka kita harus segera sadar bahwa ini adalah tuturan Soeharto tentang dirinya dan bagaimana ia bertindak sebagai manusia—terlebih-lebih sebagai seorang presiden Indonesia. Seorang yang bercerita tentang dirinya sendiri akan sangat tidak mungkin menjelek-jelekkan dirinya itu. Apalagi jika ia seorang pemimpin bangsa. Seorang pemimpin bangsa seperti Soeharto bukanlah seorang komedian yang berani meledek dirinya sendiri—itu adalah satu jenis humor yang paling sulit dan menohok.

Maka, marilah kita menikmati tuturan yang semangat dasarnya adalah menceritakan ulang sejarah diri si saya dan sejarah Indonesia dari sudut pandang pribadinya. Secara acak kita bisa melihat bagaimana

## ANNOUNCEMENT



Sitor Situmorang in 1995

One hundred years ago, on October 2, 1924, Sitor Situmorang, one of Indonesia's most acclaimed poets, was born in Harianboho, North Sumatra. In honor of that occasion, on the 24th of January, Lontar is giving its support to the Writers Unlimited International Literature Festival of the Netherlands.

The festival, formerly known as "Indische Winternacht," was established thirty years ago, the same year as the 50th anniversary of Indonesia's independence. At that inaugural event numerous Indonesian poets, musicians, and other artists participated.

This coming January, on the festival's 30th anniversary and in the year of Indonesia's 80th anniversary of independence, the festival will present the world premier of "Tale of Two Continents," a tribute to Sitor Situmorang who was a guest at the festival in 1997, 2005, 2007 and whose poetry Lontar has published.

At the festival the De Erepijs Orchestra will play seven new pieces by young Indonesian composers based on Sitor's poetry. Dutch poet Robin Block, who has family ties in Indonesia, and Indonesian cellist Emir Aditya, who lives in the Netherlands, will interweave their contemporary performance with Sitor Situmorang's work.

For more information, go to: <https://writersunlimited.nl/en/programme/the-tale-of-two-continents-world-premiere>

writers unlimited

Soeharto menanggapi serangan Belanda terhadap Yogyakarta yang dikenal sebagai Agresi Belanda Kedua dan bagaimana ia merancang Serangan Umum 1 Maret 1949 yang melambungkan namanya. Bagaimana pula perannya dalam tragedi 1965-1966, terkait posisinya saat itu sebagai Panglima Kostrad, dan tudingan terhadap Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) sebagai dalang dari Gerakan 30 September.

Atau, ambillah kasus penembakan misterius (petrus) pada paruh pertama dasawarsa 1980—sebab aku pribadi menyaksikan langsung dua korban petrus dibuang begitu saja pinggir jalan. Atas tudingan tangan besi negara dalam menghadapi gangguan keamanan yang sangat meresahkan, Soeharto berkata begini: "Itu sudah keterlaluan! Apa hal itu mau didiamkan saja? Dengan sendirinya kita harus mengadakan *treatment*, tindakan yang tegas. Tindakan tegas bagaimana? Ya, harus dengan kekerasan. Tetapi kekerasan itu bukan lantas demngan tembakan, dor! dor! begitu saja. Bukan! Tetapi yang melawan, ya, mau tidak mau harus ditembak. Karena melawan, maka mereka ditembak."

Terkait korban petrus, kita tidak tahu apakah sang korban melawan atau tidak sebelum ditembak, sebab yang kita saksikan kemudian adalah korban yang sudah mati. Apakah yang mati-mati itu benar-benar penjahat atau sekadar orang bertato, kita juga tidak tahu. Yang jelas, mereka mati.

Kukira jelas sudah, Bung. Sebuah biografi adalah urusan membagus-baguskan diri kita di hadapan sidang pembaca. Di hadapan seseorang yang sedang membagus-baguskan dirinya kita boleh percaya, tetapi sangat boleh juga kita sangsi. Termasuk terhadap sesuatu yang meminta dukungan. Misalnya, ketika beberapa hari setelah gerakan itu meletus, Bung ditanya begini: Apakah anda setuju dengan apa yang dilakukan oleh Orde Baru di Jakarta?

Aku masih ingat jawaban Bung. **Zen Hae** ([zenhae@lontar.org](mailto:zenhae@lontar.org))

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