



Lontar Newsletter

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November, 2025

Greetings

The good news first! By any measure, Indonesia's literacy gains over the past five years are encouraging. A 12% rise in the national literacy index and the fact that 78% of elementary school students can now read with basic comprehension should be cause for celebration. These numbers show that when there is a commitment to the improvement of the educational system, progress follows.

Yet beneath these headline victories is a stubborn truth that must be dealt with a.s.a.p.: Indonesia's literacy crisis is far from over, and its impact will define the nation's future. We cannot pretend that a country where 70% of students remain in the "low literacy" category is ready to compete globally. Nor can we ignore the widening gulf between students in Jakarta and those in remote regencies who are still fighting for stable electricity, let alone access to libraries or digital learning tools.

Literacy is not simply the ability to decode words. It is the foundation of every subject, every skill, and every opportunity a young Indonesian will—or will not—have. When literacy fails, everything else collapses with it: numeracy, digital skills, critical thinking, and ultimately, social mobility.

Programs such as GLS (Gerakan Literasi Sekolah), the School Literacy Movement, and strengthened regional libraries have proven that targeted interventions work. Children do read more when we put books in their hands. Schools do improve when teachers receive proper training. Communities do respond when literacy is treated as a shared responsibility rather than a bureaucratic checkbox.

Ruminations

Impressions #2

In my previous "Rumination" (Impressions #1), I spoke of my father's visit to Indonesia in 1992 when he was 73, the same age I am today. During my father's time here, he kept a "log-book," filled with his impressions. Rereading that diary (an edited form of which I published in *An Old Man's Rules for Hitchhiking*; Lontar/Godown, 2002), I am impressed by the number of words he devotes not to Indonesians but to that species of human called "tourists."

On Saturday, December 12, 1992, we were staying at the Dhyana Pura hotel on Jl. Camplung Tanduk in Seminyak, Bali. In what was then a peaceful area, not chockablock with bars, spas, and tattoo parlors, the western edge of the lonely hotel's spacious property abutted the beach, a magnificent place to watch the sun submerge itself in the sea at dusk, an equally advantageous site to observe the many tourists who migrated to that spot from various other hotels.

In my father's log-book entry for that day, judiciously abbreviated below, he later wrote: "Sitting in this place, on this beautiful beach, with time on my hands, gave me the chance to study the strange species called 'tourist' that infest, litter, and corrupt this pristine island.

"By and large, they are the most obnoxious, arrogant and ignorant group ever to be seen in one place. Most are of the newly-rich type who appear on the strand not to see but to be seen. The worst of the lot are the females, mostly early-middle-aged misshapen bags with dark glasses covering their eyes, a towel about their ample necks, and swim suits that do a totally inadequate job of holding their sagging breasts, bulging backsides, and spindly white legs together. They sit on the sand for a bit, then stroll around, trying to impress other basking whales while dropping names, such as 'I told Lady Di' or 'the Aga Khan called last night.'

"After totally failing to impress anybody, they return to their US\$ 300 per night hotel room and, I suspect, spend the rest of the day in a beauty salon, very likely, to no avail. The male of this sub-species is not so evident. Presumably they never leave the air-conditioned comfort of their expensive digs, getting splashed on US\$ 10 expense-account martinis and scheming as to how to replenish their ill-gotten gains with more thievery."

He categorized tourists in this way: "Number one, nationality; number two, size (organized tour groups, small groups, and single

But these successes are uneven, and they remain fragile. Rural students still carry the heaviest burden. What good is the GLS program to a child whose village library has fewer books than a supermarket checkout rack? Or to a classroom where the only “digital learning” tool is a smartphone the teacher bought with her own salary?

As Anindito Aditomo of the Education Standard, Curriculum, and Assessment Agency (BSKAP) pointed out recently, infrastructure is the missing link. Without investment in libraries, internet access, teacher training, and basic facilities, our literacy gains risk becoming short-lived bursts of progress instead of a sustained national transformation.

Indonesia stands at a crossroads. We can choose to celebrate progress and stop there—just be comfortable with “good enough”—or we can treat literacy as the non-negotiable foundation of national development. That means coordinated action: a government willing to fund real change, schools empowered to innovate, and communities that recognize literacy as a collective priority, not just a classroom task.

If we want a generation capable of meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing world, literacy must move from the margins to the center of our national agenda. Not next year and not when budgets allow. Now!

Though Lontar’s mission is to introduce Indonesia to the world through literary translations, we firmly believe that our work is a very important element in the country’s literary ecosystem. These past few years have been financially-troubling ones for the foundation and while we express our sincerest thanks to everyone who has contributed to Lontar, with the end of the year ahead, we urge others to contribute as well.

Yuli Ismartono (yismartono@lontar.org)

tourists); and number three, the professional wanderer or the religious nut in search of the ‘truth’ (most of whom are as phony as a three-dollar bill) and the bum who thinks the world owes him a living.”

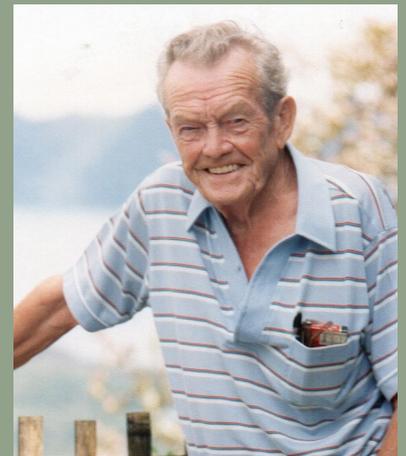
The dregs of the tourists whom, he said, “deserve to be reincarnated as leeches,” are “Fact-finding groups, American congressmen and their retinue; minor European politicians; and African and Asian nabobs.” These people, he contended, “spend a few days here in an alcoholic haze, are given a tin medal of some sort, and run up astronomical bills at the Hyatt or Hilton, all financed by their over-burdened taxpayers at home, after which they embark on the next leg of their journey of thievery.”

Whether my father’s observations in that year and at that time hold more than a grain of truth is up to others to determine but, when rereading his log book, I decided to look at some of my initial impressions after my arrival in Indonesia in 1976.

Unlike my father, who was a tourist, a “Number 2” in his own categorization, because I had come to Indonesia to live, at least for a time, I did not see other non-Indonesians as “tourists” but, rather, as “foreigners.” In my notes from my first few months in Indonesia, I had plenty to say about that latter tribe, a few snippets of which, I quote below.

On a trip to North Sumatra in September 1976, when I was on Samsosir Island, I wrote: “Many of the sellers and people off the street know bits of English and are happy to use it, but are happier still to hear their own language being used. Then there are the English, French, German and other foreigners who insist on speaking in their native tongue, not even attempting Indonesian, Batak, or another local language while at the same time jesting about the fractured English the ‘natives’ use with them. Their insensitivity angers and embarrasses me, especially foreigners from the United States for I come from that country, too. Yes, ‘The Ugly American.’”

During that same trip, in October, when stopping in Rantau Panjang, South Sumatra, on my way back to Jakarta, I wrote: “Some foreigners can be such idiots, it amazes me. They come here not knowing one word of Indonesian, not really having any interest in Indonesian culture other than the entertainment it can provide for them and then get so angry that these stupid Indonesians can’t understand what their saying and don’t



John A McGlynn in Bali in 1992

AUTHOR OF THE MONTH



Montinggo Boesje

Courtesy: Ensiklopedia Sastra Indonesia

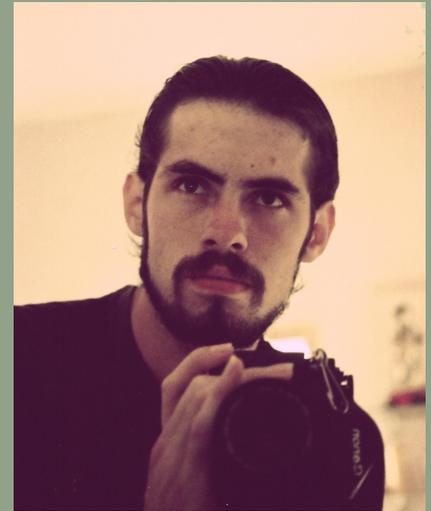
Montinggo Boesje, the penname of Bustami Djalid was born November 21, 1937. Not just a multi-talented author with 200 titles attributed to his name, including (at least) 20 novels, several dramas, and numerous screenplays, he was a director and painter as well.

Though both Montinggo's parents were of Minangkabau descent, the author spent his younger years in Bandar Lampung, South Sumatra where his father worked. Following the premature death of both his parents when he was 11, he was raised by his grandmother in Bukittinggi, West Sumatra.

After high-school, Montinggo studied law at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta but did not graduate. Instead, he found a career in creative writing and a very productive one at that, becoming one of only a handful of authors who was able to survive from the proceeds of his literary output.

His earliest works, including the award-winning play, *Malam Djahanam* (translated by Ian Jarvis Brown and published by Lontar under the title *Night of the Accursed*) were known for their serious tone. His later works were known for their popularity among readers. Many of his works were made into films. In addition to English, his work has also been translated into numerous other languages, including Dutch, French, German, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese.

readily accept their 'free-living,' 'free-thinking' life style. It reminds me of when I was working as a waiter in the summers of my high school years in Wisconsin Dells. All those people from Chicago I had to serve with their uppity ways. The foreigners here must be their offspring. And yet I find myself defending them. I apologize that the foreign tourists haven't tried to adapt to Indonesian norms but



John H McGlynn in Jakarta in 1976

always add that most of them are perfectly acceptable in their own countries."

That trip to Sumatra opened my eyes to a number of things, first and foremost the ignorance of most foreigners about Indonesia. Back in Jakarta, on October 11, I wrote, "I was thinking of the places I have been to and was wondering how many Americans would know of them. Indonesians seem to have a pretty good idea about the geography of the Western world—Europe and the Americas, at least—but 'our' knowledge of other cultures, Asian and African, in particular, is very much lacking. Indonesian grade school children learn about the U.S. but how many American primary-school pupils know about Indonesia? There may be political and economic reasons for this but I believe the problem reflects the narrow-mindedness of U.S. educational policy makers who do not recognize there to be any other valid political system besides 'the American way' or any other language of necessity except English. I hope this changes in the future. If we don't willingly change our ways soon, we are going to be forced to change; the world is rapidly shrinking."

Frankly, in my close to five decades in Indonesia, I have witnessed too little change in foreign attitudes towards Indonesia, especially in my own myopic native land where cultural interchange is seen as a one-way street. But, when comparing my father's initial impressions and my own, I see that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. An openness to other cultures requires education, only through which will both the "misshapen bags" on Seminyak Beach and the foreign idiots in Rantau Panjang take off their dark sunglasses and truly see the wonders of the world around them.

John McGlynn (john_mcglynn@lontar.org)



At the session devoted to Pramoedya Ananta Toer
Photograph: Ega Putra-UWRF

An interesting juxtaposition of events took place at this year's Ubud Writers & Readers Festival. Two recent Lontar publications are a translation of the novella, *Lararasati*, by Pramoedya Ananta Toer and *Reading the Signs*, a collection of poems by Taufiq Ismail.

Pramoedya is recognized as one of, if not the most well-known Indonesian author to date. This year marked the 100th anniversary of his birth and a panel, titled "100 Years of Pramoedya," was devoted to him.

Taufiq Ismail, one of Indonesia's most prolific and influential poets was honored as this year's recipient of UWRF's Lifetime Achievement Award. Another panel, titled "Reading the Signs" was devoted to his life's work.

Perhaps only those who know the history of Indonesian literature might have noticed, but one issue not addressed in either session was the fact that in the 1960s, the two authors were on opposite sides of the political spectrum. What these two panels showed, implicitly if not explicitly, is that in literature, if not in politics, there can be no enemies.



At the session devoted to Taufiq Ismail
Photograph: Wisuda Dwipana-UWRF

Surat dari Pejompongan

WINARTA

Kawan Moer,

Dalam menulis, aku menyukai ungkapan-ungkapan yang padat—meski kadang-kadang, aku senang juga bermain-main dengan kalimat panjang. Itulah kenapa aku langsung jatuh cinta pada novela *Winarta* karya Basuki Gunawan—yang edisi Inggrisnya barusan diterbitkan Lontar. Sebuah cerita yang bukan hanya ringkas (ya, tidak lebih dari 100 halaman), tetapi juga disusun dalam kalimat-kalimat yang padat dan pelukisan cerita yang berpegang pada prinsip “cukup”.

Novela ini hampir tidak pernah dibicarakan dalam sastra Indonesia, sebab memang pada awalnya ia ditulis dalam bahasa Belanda dan baru sempat diterbitkan versi Indonesianya oleh Marjin Kiri dua tahun lalu—setahun setelah edisi Belanda terbit oleh Alfabet.

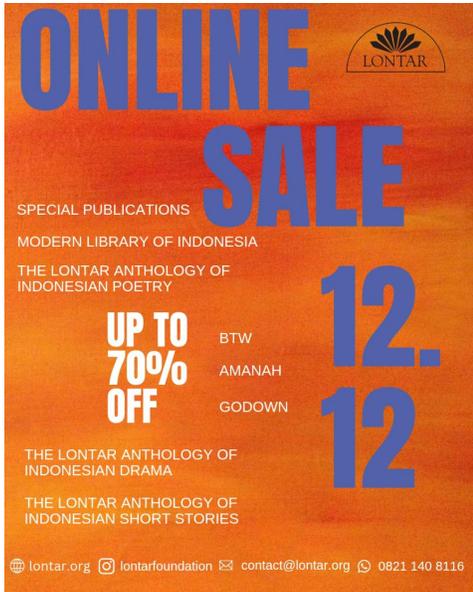
Sebagai novela karya penulis Indonesia yang bermukim di Belanda, buku ini terbilang menarik. Ia pernah terbit sebagai cerita bersambung di majalah *De Nieuwe Stem* dan pernah meraih penghargaan pujian juri pada hadiah sastra Reina Prinsen Geerligsprijs, tapi tidak pernah terbit di Belanda hingga 2022.

Ini sebenarnya sebuah novel dengan semangat anticolonial yang kuat. Berbeda dari *Buiten het gareel* karya Suwarsih Djojopuspito yang memotret dunia pergerakan nasionalis era 1930-an dan terbit di Belanda, novel ini justru mengambil masa Revolusi (1945-1949) sebagai latar cerita. Sikap patriotis si tokoh utama yang artinya menegaskan permusuhan kepada tentara Belanda, itulah yang membuat novel ini tidak pernah terbit sebagai buku di Belanda. Hubungan Indonesia-Belanda yang tegang setelah pengakuan kedaulatan 27 Desember 1949, membuat novel ini seperti memperpanjang daftar dosa Belanda kepada Indonesia.

Aku tidak terlampau tertarik kepada sikap patriotis si tokoh utama, sebab itu bisa ditunjukkan oleh ribuan prajurit Indonesia yang gugur selama perang melawan Belanda, yang bernama dan tidak bernama. Itu adalah sikap kolektif yang menguat dan terus menguat hingga perang berakhir di meja perundingan. Latar waktu ini juga menjadi pilihan utama sastra Indonesia di masa itu: perang dan bagaimana manusia Indonesia sintas dari sana.

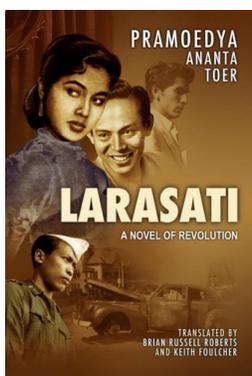
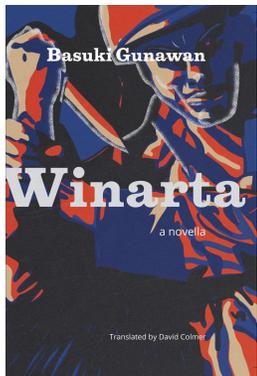
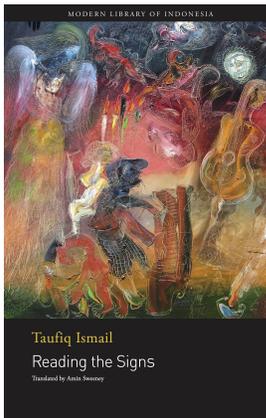
Yang membuatku asyik dengan novel ini adalah cara Basuki Gunawan melukiskan perang dalam perspektif seorang prajurit Indonesia. Cara pandanginya tentang perang sangat dingin. Ia melihat kematian korban perang sebagaimana seorang pemuda melihat kematian ibunya dalam *Orang Asing*-nya Albert Camus. Itulah kenapa ada yang menyebut novela ini membawa semangat “Orang Asing” dalam situasi perang Kemerdekaan di Indonesia. Kematian tinggal kematian. Tidak ada duka cita yang berlebihan.

SALE!



Dapatkan buku-buku Lontar dengan diskon besar dan harga menarik pada 12 Desember 2025, melalui website Lontar <https://lontar.org> dan toko daring dengan akun Lontar Shop.

Harga khusus juga berlaku untuk tiga buku terbaru Lontar yang sudah terbit. Kunjungi kami dan belanja sepuasnya.



Basuki juga berhasil mengendalikan cerita itu dalam prinsip pengisahan yang, ya itu tadi, cukup. Kalimatnya tidak bertele-tele dan paragrafnya juga singkat-singkat. Satuan-satuan peristiwa selesai dalam satu-dua paragraf. Tetapi dia terus membetot kita dengan cara dia melukiskan sikap tokoh yang dingin itu. Yang tidak melihat peristiwa tragis dengan emosi yang berlebihan. Bukan hanya soal kematian, tetapi bagaimana seorang tentara musuh merampas kekasih si tokoh utama pada bagian akhir cerita. Dalam edisi Inggris, dikatakan dalam dua paragraf singkat seperti ini:

Like a wild animal, the lieutenant held his coquettishly wriggling prey tight and tore the kimono off her body.

Then the door closed.

Kukira pengisahan model begini sangat menarik. Tidak ada lagi moral cerita yang penuh keharuan terhadap korban. Si aku adalah orang asing buat kekasihnya yang beberapa menit sebelumnya telah menjadi teman tidurnya. Ini perang toh. Tidak banyak pilihan yang bisa dibuat, kecuali merelakan hukum rimba perang berlaku di kamar itu.

Kita berhadapan dengan fiksi yang telah menempatkan manusia menjadi mesin perang, yang bekerja dengan caranya sendiri. Harus ada yang dikorbankan, itulah si aku dan kekasihnya, agar perang itu menemukan ironinya yang kuat, dan dari situlah novel Basuki Gunawan mendapatkan nilai pentingnya.

Kukira, kau harus segera membacanya, Bung. Mudah-mudahan segera dapat bukunya. Ciao! **Zen Hae** (zenhae@lontar.org)

Donate to Lontar through our account:

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Bank Name: Bank Negara Indonesia (BNI)

Bank address: Jl. Bendungan Hilir Raya, Jakarta 10210

Account number: 0461 2005 62, Swift code: CENA IDJA

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