



# Lontar Newsletter

Email: [contact@lontar.org](mailto:contact@lontar.org)

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## Greetings

Here's wishing all friends and supporters of Lontar a happy and productive new year. We at Lontar are gearing up to face the challenges of our work to monitor the arts and culture scene and to explore existing and emerging talent to be supported and promoted. It will not be easy, given the climate of devastating natural disasters in many parts of the country as a result of flooding, landslides, and continuous rainfall since last December. In addition to hundreds of lives lost, many homes, public facilities, and schools have been destroyed.

Disasters of such magnitude are rarely foreseen or predicted, yet Indonesia is known to be the second most disaster-prone country in the world, second only to the Philippines. This raises an unavoidable question: shouldn't there have been stronger systems of disaster mitigation and preparedness in place? While disasters cannot be prevented, their impact can be reduced through planning, education, early warning mechanisms, and coordinated responses at both the institutional and community levels. Mitigation is not merely a technical matter; it is a long-term commitment to readiness, requiring shared responsibility between government agencies, schools, civil society, and local communities.

The National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) has made significant efforts to establish a "culture" of mitigation and preparedness. However, at present only 15.1% of all provinces have such mitigation systems in place. This gap points not only to uneven infrastructure, but also to uneven awareness. What needs to be done to inculcate in people's minds the need to be prepared for

## Ruminations

### Issues, Incidents, Images

Included in my top-ten list of favorite and personally-influential books is the 1973 historical nonfiction publication, *Wisconsin Death Trip* by Michael Lesy who developed the book while pursuing his master's degree at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960s. The book charts numerous sordid, tragic, and bizarre incidents that took place in and around Jackson County, Wisconsin, between 1885 and 1900, primarily in the town of Black River Falls, and incorporates in its text historical documents, mainly articles from the local newspaper, *Badger State Banner*. Thematically, the book emphasizes the harsh aspects of Midwestern rural life—such issues as crime, pestilence, mental illness, and urbanization. In addition to a disintegration of the local economy after the closure of several mines, the populace is plagued by a diphtheria epidemic that claims the lives of numerous children, as well as a series of violent crimes, murders, suicides, arsons, religious delusions, mental illness, and superstitions. The (approximately) 200 stark black and white images that accompany the text—photographs and portraits from that same period, all by Charles Van Schaick, a German immigrant and town photographer, including images of children in caskets, stalwart farm families, men posing in their workplace—both complement the text and make the harsh realities the population endured even more vivid.

In May 1997, when Soeharto was "reelected" as president in yet another rigged election for a seventh term in office, I was convinced that by the end of the term, five years hence, in 2002, the country's "Father of Development" would, once and for all, call it quits. After thirty-six years of one-man rule, he and the country would—*Insyallah*—be ready to move on.



In front of a massive billboard depicting the Father and Mother of Development in 1985

catastrophes? Community-based campaigns could be initiated by local governments, but a culture of disaster response must be introduced at an early age. Schools play a crucial role here. While most curricula include environmental science and related subjects, practical preparedness remains largely absent. Students should be familiar with evacuation routes, basic safety procedures, and simple protective equipment such as life jackets, waterproof clothing, or raincoats. Clearly, there is an urgent need to cultivate a culture of disaster response, both in schools and in local communities, so that preparedness becomes second nature rather than an afterthought.

A similar logic of mitigation applies to the cultural field. Just as natural disasters expose physical vulnerabilities, social, political, and economic pressures expose the fragility of cultural ecosystems. Without foresight and preparedness, artistic practices, independent institutions, and emerging voices are easily disrupted—by funding cuts, censorship, market pressures, or the loss of archives and spaces. Cultural work, like disaster response, requires long-term planning: identifying risks, strengthening support structures, building networks, and ensuring continuity through education and documentation.

In this sense, Lontar's work can be seen as a form of cultural mitigation. By monitoring developments, supporting writers and translators, and fostering awareness of Indonesia's literary and cultural diversity, Lontar helps build resilience within the cultural sphere. Preparedness in culture, as in disaster management, is not about predicting every crisis, but about creating systems robust enough to withstand shocks and adaptable enough to endure.

Yuli Ismartono ([yismartono@lontar.org](mailto:yismartono@lontar.org))

That is when I thought of *Wisconsin Death Trip*. If Soeharto had five more years in office, that would be time enough to prepare a textual and pictorial history of the headline events that punctuated his reign as head of state. There would be a challenge to the book's publication and distribution, I knew, especially if Soeharto was still in power when the book was released and, even more so, if it contained the blemishes and not just the beauty marks of his presidency. However, as it was intended to be a fact-based history—one dissimilar from the hagiographies about Soeharto already in print—I also thought, it might have a chance for a successful gestation.

Goenawan Mohamad, a co-founder of Lontar, applauded the idea when I discussed it with him and, with initial funding from IFFI, the Institute for the Free Flow of Information, which he established in 1995 (following the government's closure of *Tempo* magazine, of which he was editor-in-chief, in 1994), I hired American specialist on Indonesian history, Jeffrey Hadler, and Indonesian journalist, Gedsiri Suhartono, to build a database of headline news, specifically the most frequently-appearing issues and incidents the Indonesian mass media covered during "the Soeharto years." The frequency of citation of a particular issue or incident would be a key factor in determining the book's table of contents.

Initially, work was going well but then, a spanner was thrown into the works, that being the Asian Economic Crisis which led to the free-fall of the rupiah, then to economic unrest, and, finally, to political upheaval when, in May 1998, Soeharto resigned.

I couldn't believe it. The president had, of his own volition, stepped down from the throne, *lengser ke prabon*. Not that I objected to his "early" resignation but, coming on top of the economic crisis, which had decimated Lontar's coffers, production plans not just for that book but for all Lontar publications and activities were abruptly put on hold.

For a time, as I scrambled to raise funds, nothing happened at Lontar, at least in terms of production, but then, fortunately, a grant from the Asia Foundation for the promotion of democracy through the use of oral traditions helped to put the foundation back on its feet. In thirty-one locations around the country, Lontar engaged well-known local performers and troupes to spread news of the right to freedom of expression through puppet performances, dance, music, and song. Meanwhile, on the national stage, with former vice president B.J. Habibie now serving as president and a presidential election scheduled for May 1999, an increasing number of international institutions whose focus was on human rights and freedom of expression were looking at Indonesia as a case study, among them Open Society Institute (OSI) and the Carter Center. A key individual at OSF was Maureen Aung-Thwin with whom I had worked three decades previously on the organizing committee for KIAS (Kesenian Indonesia di Amerika Serikat), a year-long series of

## AUTHOR OF THE MONTH



Photo source: Wikipedia

Arief Budiman, a contributor to *Indonesia in the Soeharto Years* (discussed in this month's "Rumination"), was born Soe Hok Djinn on January 3, 1940. As a student at the University of Indonesia, he was active in the 1966 movement that helped bring down President Soekarno and usher in Soeharto's New Order. He soon became disillusioned with the regime, however, and emerged as one of its early critics.

In 1972, Arief left Indonesia for Europe and the U.S., prompted in part by having incurred the personal anger of Soeharto. This followed his leadership of protests against Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, the "Mini Indonesia" theme park initiated by Madame Tien Soeharto, which involved the forced eviction of local residents. In 1980, he earned a PhD in sociology from Harvard University.

He later returned to Indonesia to teach at Satya Wacana Christian University in Salatiga. There, he played a key role in establishing a postgraduate program in development studies that briefly became one of the strongest in the country.

In 1996, Arief was dismissed from the university after protesting irregularities in the appointment of a new rector. He subsequently became Professor of Indonesian Studies at the University of Melbourne, where he contributed significantly through teaching, scholarship, and frequent media commentary—especially after *reformasi*. He retired in 2008 and died of Parkinson's disease on April 23, 2020.

exhibitions and performances highlighting Indonesian culture in the United States. I reached out to her and she, too, liked the idea of documenting Indonesia's hoped-for transition from authoritarianism to democracy. Thereafter, a substantial grant from OSI permitted Lontar to enlist the assistance of additional editorial staff, including Bambang Bujono, Suzanne Charlé, and Margaret Glade-Agusta. Especially important was the addition of photographic editor, Oscar Motuloh and his team from Antara News Archives.

At the time of the 1999 election, when B.J. Habibie lost his mandate to serve as president and Abdurrahman Wahid or "Gus Dur" was elected president, I decided to extend the timeline for the book to the next presidential election in 2004, which would be the first-ever openly democratic election in Indonesian history. That would be enough time to tell if Indonesia's evolution towards democracy was working.

Because of this self-imposed extension, work on the book seemed to proceed at a snail's pace but, in the end, the editorial team put together more than 50 essays by economists, government leaders, journalists, activists and scholars (most of whom had been key players in the

incident or issue about which they wrote); 80 photographic series and extended captions; and 500 historical photographs. With photographs from 136 photographers and agencies under one cover, covering the entire alphabet from A Margana to Zulkifly Lubis, and the first-ever comprehensive pictorial look at contemporary Indonesian history, the book, *Indonesia in the Soeharto Years: Issues, Images, and Incidents*, was a publishing milestone.

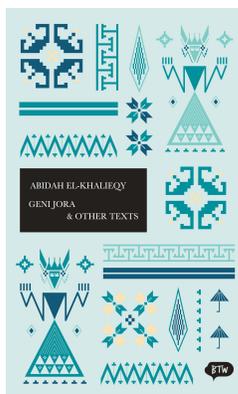
Goenawan Mohamad contributed a moving preface; Taufiq Abdullah wrote the introduction; and a final essay by Douglas Ramage on "Lessons in Democracy" ended the book. Once we had all the materials, we sent the MS to the Carter Center and, much to our delight former president Jimmy Carter consented to write a foreword to the book. It was he, who as U.S. president put pressure on President Soeharto to release more than 35,000 political prisoners, a key moment in modern Indonesian history.

When the first edition of the book was ready for press in late 2004, I thought again of *Wisconsin Death Trip* and the photographer, Charles Van Schaick, when I dedicated the book to Indonesia's journalists and photo-journalists "who keep the record of historical memory alive."

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



Cover of *Indonesia in the Soeharto Years: Issues, Incidents and Images*



Born in Jombang, East Java, in 1965, Abidah El Khalieqy is one of Indonesia's most productive and popular authors. Her book, *Geni Jora & Other Texts*, was published in a trilingual edition (English, Indonesian, and German) under Lontar's BTW imprint. Translated by Joan Suyenaga, the volume contains excerpts from two novels, *Geni Jora and Mataraisa*, as well as a short story titled "Gendis."

Abidah's work gives voice to women, including victims of polygamy and domestic violence. A distinctive feature of her writing is its frequent setting in *pesantren*, which serve as important social and cultural spaces in her narratives. Her works have sparked sustained discussion and have come to be regarded as models for gender representation in Indonesian literature. Through her use of language and narrative structure, she conveys complex feminist issues and perspectives, contributing to a deeper understanding of women's struggles within patriarchal societies. Her writing functions not only as creative expression but also as a means of raising awareness and challenging entrenched social norms. As such, her work has become a vital part of feminist literature, offering nuanced insights into the lives of women in Indonesia.

Her short stories and novels, in particular, have been widely reviewed and have served as material for research and analysis in more than a hundred undergraduate and master's theses, as well as doctoral dissertations, at universities across Indonesia.

## Surat dari Pejompongan

### TEROPONG

Kawanku yang baik,

Pada suatu ketika aku membeli buku *Pembebasan Pertama* (1949) karya Amal Hamzah di sebuah lapak buku daring. Itu adalah buku gabungan yang memuat puisi, sketsa dan naskah drama karya seorang sastrawan yang juga adalah adik penyair Amir Hamzah. Dalam perpuisian Indonesia semasa Chairil Anwar, Amal bukanlah nama yang terlalu kuat, tetapi cukup penting sebagai penerjemah. Ia pernah menerjemahkan *Gitanyali* karya Rabindranath Tagore.

Dalam buku ini aku tertarik kepada sketsa-sketsanya yang melukiskan pelbagai peristiwa yang pernah dialami Amal. Lebih khusus lagi kepada sketsanya yang berjudul "Teropong". Ini adalah lukisan suasana yang menarik dan menggambarkan bagaimana Amal, tepatnya si "aku", naik kereta dari Jakarta ke Banten. Judul "Teropong" jadi mengena betul, karena dengan begitu si penulis meneropong keadaan yang sangat dekat dengannya dan hasilnya adalah perincian peristiwa yang biasa saja, sebenarnya, tetapi memberi kita ketajaman amatan seorang penulis.

Dalam sketsa itu dia menggambarkan suasana di dalam kereta yang penuh sesak dan perhatiannya langsung terpacak kepada seorang anak Tionghoa Peranakan berusia lima tahun dan ibunya. Ada juga anak kecil lagi yang adalah adik dari si anak kecil itu yang dijaga oleh seorang babu Sunda. Ibu si anak dengan bersemangat menjejalkan aneka makanan kepada anaknya yang besar, agar perjalanan dengan kereka rakyat itu bisa lebih bisa dinikmati.

Tapi, amatan Amal juga bergeser ke bagian-bagian lain dalam kereta. Tengoklah bagaimana Amal melukiskan kesibukan orang makan makanan yang dibeli dari pedagang asongan:

"Mataku kupejamkan lagi dan dari celah bulu mataku kuperamat-amati tingkah laku orang yang makan itu. Ada yang mulutnya berlinang oleh karena minyak makanan, ada pula yang keluar ingus dari hidungnya oleh kepedasan makan sambal terasi, tetapi tidak mau membuang tempoh menyeka hidungnya yang tercingah lebar karena memberikan jalan lalu pada ingusnya. Dentaman kereta di sela-sela oleh kercap-kercep orang-orang yang makan . . ."

Lukisan Amal kelihatan begitu realistis, dekat dan menimbulkan kesan yang terasa sangat dekat dengan kehidupan kita hari ini. Memang, sekarang ini suasana menumpang kereta dari Jakarta ke Banten sudah berbeda dari masa era 1940-an ketika sketsa ini ditulis. Sudah lebih modern, teratur dan rapi. Sekarang ini penumpang tidak boleh lagi makan dan minum di dalam kereta. Para penjual makanan-minuman bahkan sudah dihalau jauh-jauh hari.

## FEATURED TRANSLATOR



Joan Suyenaga was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. Her initial introduction to Indonesia was through the study of traditional Javanese gamelan in 1973, when there were more horse carts on the road than cars. After earning her M.A. in Anthropology from the University of Hawaii, she returned to Yogyakarta in 1982, for further studies of traditional Javanese music, performing arts and language. Over the past 40 years, she has raised a family and worked as a freelance translator, writer and editor.

She contributed articles for the *Java* guidebook (Periplus Adventure Guide) and retold Indonesian folk stories in *Indonesian Children's Favorite Stories* (Periplus). Her translations of Indonesian poetry and short stories have been appeared in various Lontar publications, including *Menagerie*, *The Lontar Anthology of Indonesian Poetry* and *The Lontar Anthology of Short Stories*, *Geni Jora & Other Texts* by Abidah El-Khalieqy, *A Man Bathing & Other Poems* by Hanna Francisca, *May Fire & Other Poems* by Warih Wisatsana, and *The Mysterious Marksman* by Seno Gumira Ajidarma. She also translated the novel *Sermon of the Mount* by Kuntowijoyo, and edited a collection of translations of wayang performances published by Lontar.

Her translation of *Anak Bajang Herds the Wind* by Sindhunata will be published by Tuttle Publishing.

Yang mau kukatakan kemudian adalah betapa sebuah lukisan peristiwa dalam kereka bisa dikerjakan dengan sangat realistis. Ini sebenarnya semacam latihan penulis fiksi. Lukisan itu—jika mengacu kepada Amal dalam sketsa ini—bisa sangat realistis, tetapi tidak bertele-tele. Pelukisan itu keluar-masuk antara deskripsi keadaan dan refleksi penulis, antara keramaian penumpang dan sikap pribadi penulis yang cenderung tidak larut dalam keadaan tersebut.

Dalam fiksi realis kita membutuhkan pelukisan yang seperti itu. Fiksi dihadirkan dengan semacam teropong keadaan yang tajam, yang bekerja dengan kesadaran penuh seorang penulis, untuk mendapatkan gambaran yang realistis, tetapi tidak membosankan pembaca. Dengan kata lain, penulis mesti memilih sudut pandang dalam mengarahkan teropongnya. Ia mesti punya selera yang cukup baik dalam memilih peristiwa mana yang perlu ia keker dan mana pula yang mesti diabaikan.

Dengan kesadaran seperti itu, pada akhirnya, kita bisa menyimpulkan bahwa menulis fiksi sebagaimana dikatakan dalam bahasa Indonesia “mengarang” artinya sebenarnya “merangkai karangan bunga”, artinya lagi, merangkai mana bunga yang perlu dipajang dengan bunga lain, agar menampilkan keindahan baru. Mengarang, dalam hal ini adalah memilah-milih peristiwa berdasarkan kerangka atau desain fiksional yang sudah dibangun oleh penulisnya.

Sebagai permulaan, bisalah kau mencoba membayangkan duduk di sebuah warung kopi di pasar dan mulailah melukiskan keadaan berdasarkan kepentingan penulisan yang sudah kau ancing. Mulailah mengarahkan teropong fiksimu kepada peristiwa di sekitar dan beri pembaca pemandangan terpilih, terbaik, dalam desain baru yang seakan-akan tidak lahir dari peristiwa di sebuah warung kopi di pojok pasar.

Ini pekerjaan menulis yang menyenangkan, tetapi, sampai di sini, aku mesti berhenti, sebab kau mesti mencobanya langsung. Kapan waktu, kulanjutkan lagi. Salam hangat selalu. **Zen Hae** ([zenhae@lontar.org](mailto:zenhae@lontar.org))

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