



Lontar Newsletter

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July, 2026

Greetings

Indonesia's book industry has found new cause for optimism. Research conducted in 2025 points to growing interest in reading, while book fairs are attracting increasing numbers of young visitors—especially members of Generation Z. For publishers, librarians, and booksellers, these developments suggest that books continue to hold an important place in the lives of young Indonesians, even in an era dominated by digital media.

The trend was highlighted during the National Seminar, *"Preserving Literary Heritage and Upholding the Nation's Dignity,"* organized by the National Library of Indonesia (Perpusnas) to mark its 46th anniversary and National Book Day 2026.

One of the clearest signs of this renewed enthusiasm was last year's Indonesia International Book Fair at the Jakarta Convention Center, where the exhibition halls were packed with visitors, many of them from Generation Z. Young readers were already following international publishing news, eagerly awaiting new releases, and discussing titles online long before Indonesian translations became available. One recently published foreign book had already sold out by the time of the fair, despite not yet having been translated into Indonesian.

These developments challenge the assumption that digital technology has diminished the importance of books. Instead, online communities and social media have helped young readers discover new titles and participate in conversations that extend far

Ruminations

On the Fourth of July

Just before dawn on July 4, 1960, when I was seven and my brother Mark was five, our father roused the two of us from sleep. "Feet on the floor, boys," he said in a hushed voice. "We're going to give the girls a surprise." Ranging in age from fourteen years to six months, the "girls"—our seven sisters—were sound asleep in beds, a crib, and a bassinet.

Still dressed in our pajamas, we followed Daddy down the stairs, through the kitchen, and out the back door to the woodshed, where he pulled a canvas bag from behind the door. He then led us down the hill, whose dew-covered grass chilled our bare feet and dampened the cuffs of our cotton pants. Through the swamp to the creek at its edge, we went, where a large willow tree stood, its thick lower branches jutting from the trunk at nearly a forty-five-degree angle.

From the bag, Daddy removed a roll of hemp twine, a stick of dynamite, and a detonator cap with an attached fuse. Knowing about the explosive power of "nitro," as it was called in such television Westerns as *Bonanza*, *Rawhide*, and *Gunsmoke*, we watched wide-eyed as he wound one end of the twine around the stick of dynamite and tied it tightly near the center. After tossing the roll of twine over one of the lower branches, he pulled on the loose end until the dynamite hung in midair at about the height of my head, then knotted the twine to the branch.

Next, he inserted the blasting cap into the end of the stick of dynamite, its fuse trailing downward. Then he reached into the bag again and pulled out a box of wooden friction matches. He put one match in Mark's hand and one in mine and told us to hold their heads together. Striking another match himself, he touched its flame to the heads of ours until they flared to life.

He told us to hold our burning matches to the end of the fuse. The moment it began to sputter and the flame started eating its way along it, he shouted for us to run. And run we did, as fast as we could, back up the hill. When we turned around, the scene was still. Then, a split second later, the fuse reached the blasting cap, which in turn set off the dynamite with an ear-splitting explosion.

The grazing cattle in the field beyond the creek bellowed, and the girls—Mother included, with baby Christine in her arms—came rushing from the house. Sixty-six years later, I can still feel that twinge of pleasure

beyond Indonesia. Books remain an essential source of knowledge, creativity, and imagination, fostering the sustained attention and critical thinking that benefit people in every field.

Challenges remain, however. Indonesia continues to struggle with aliteracy—the condition in which people can read but do not develop regular reading habits. Building a stronger reading culture therefore depends not only on education but also on improving access to books through libraries and bookstores, ensuring affordable prices, and making reading a more integral part of everyday life.

These efforts also require effective implementation of Law No. 3 of 2017 on the National Book System, which calls for quality books to be made available throughout the country at affordable prices.

Another emerging issue is the rapid development of artificial intelligence. As AI systems increasingly rely on published works for training, authors and publishers are calling for stronger copyright protection and fair compensation through licensing agreements and royalty payments.

Together, these developments suggest a promising future. While the ways young people discover and discuss books are changing, Generation Z appears to be demonstrating that the desire to read remains strong—and may well be leading a new chapter in Indonesia's literary culture.

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from seeing my sisters' startled reaction and the happy look on my father's face for having delivered on his promise of a surprise.

Exactly sixteen years later, on July 4, 1976, when I was twenty-three, I found myself in Malang, East Java, studying advanced Indonesian with a group of American students at the Malang Teachers' College. Because it was the bicentennial of U.S. independence, our program director, John Wolff, suggested that we host a Fourth of July party for our Indonesian teachers, teaching assistants, and the friends we had made since arriving a month earlier.

More than a hundred guests came. Most of the American dishes were Fourth of July standards, but after a month of rice at nearly every meal, they tasted like manna from heaven to me. Not every culinary contribution was a success, however. One macaroni salad tasted like wallpaper paste, and another student's homemade rolls could have been used to fill the holes in the cobblestone walkway outside the common room where the party was held.

I contributed a potato salad and a bowl of baked beans. To my surprise, the beans turned out almost as good as my mother's, despite the improvised ingredients. Many people liked them, or at least said they did. Navy beans were not then common fare in Indonesia; Indonesian friends told me they make you *mabuk*—dizzy or drunk. Of course, I knew they caused flatulence, but I had never before heard that explanation for avoiding them. That, too, was a surprise.

The biggest surprise, however, had come earlier that day in the kitchen of the Soejono family home on Jalan Kerinci, where I was boarding. One of the American students had lived in Indonesia before and had brought with him a potato peeler—a simple kitchen tool that was virtually unknown there at the time. As I peeled potatoes for the salad, Ibu Arief, my landlady, and her two helpers gathered around to watch. They oohed and aahed as the skins came off in long, curling ribbons, amazed that such an ordinary object could do its work so quickly, unlike the paring knives they used.

A month later, after asking my mother to send one from the United States, I presented Ibu Arief with a potato peeler of her own. Of all I remember from that bicentennial Fourth of July,



Ibu Arief Soejono with one of her six children.

AUTHOR OF THE MONTH



Oka Rusmini

Oka Rusmini was born in Jakarta on 11 July 1967 and now lives in Bali with her husband, the poet and critic Arif Bagus Prasetyo. One of Indonesia's most distinguished contemporary writers, she is acclaimed for her poetry, fiction, drama, and children's literature, particularly for her nuanced exploration of women's lives within Bali's patriarchal social order.

She has published more than a dozen books, including novels, short story collections, and volumes of poetry, while also serving as a regular contributor and staff member of the *Bali Post*. Her works have appeared in numerous anthologies and have received many prestigious literary honors, including awards from the National Language Development Agency in 2003 and 2012, the Tantular Literary Award (2012), the S.E.A. Write Award presented by the Royal Thai Government (2012), the Kusala Sastra Khatulistiwa for her poetry collection *Saiban* (2014), and the CSR Indonesia Award for Excellence in Cultural Initiative (2019).

Her novel *Tarian Bumi* (*Earth Dance*), first published in 2003, received a literary achievement award from the Indonesian Ministry of National Education and has been translated into several languages, including English, German, Italian, and Korean. Oka Rusmini is also a frequent speaker at literary festivals, conferences, and cultural events in Indonesia and abroad.

her delighted smile is what has endured.

Fifty years later, on July 4, 2026, I am seventy-three years old and the United States has just commemorated the 250th anniversary of its Declaration of Independence. Not surprisingly, given that I live in Indonesia's capital, this Fourth of July passed uneventfully, with no happy surprises at all. Yet the day itself prompted me to reflect on the so-called inalienable right proclaimed in the Declaration: "the pursuit of happiness."

When I was a boy in 1960, I lacked the experience to think much about such things. As a young man in 1976, I largely understood "happiness" in terms of my own feelings and satisfactions. But over the ensuing five decades—with all of life's disappointments and joys, failures and blessings—I have come to appreciate more fully what Thomas Jefferson appears to have meant.

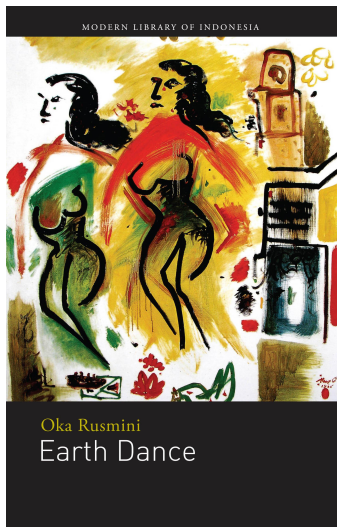
Today, many people equate happiness with pleasure or personal satisfaction—even more so than when I was young. Yet Jefferson's understanding was rooted in an older tradition, one that saw happiness not as a passing emotion but as human flourishing: a life shaped by purpose, learning, virtue, and moral growth. The pursuit of happiness is not a guarantee that life will unfold as we hope. Rather, it is the freedom to seek a life of meaning while contributing to the well-being of others. Happiness, in this sense, is inseparable from responsibility.

Thinking about happiness also brings to mind Ashley Montagu, the British-American anthropologist who viewed humanity as a single family enriched by its diversity. In *The American Way of Life*, he observed, "The moments of happiness we enjoy take us by surprise. It is not that we seize them, but that they seize us."

His words resonate with each of these Fourths of July. The delight my father took in surprising his family. The unexpected joy of watching Ibu Soejono marvel at an ordinary potato peeler. Neither happiness could have been manufactured or possessed. Each arose unexpectedly from human connection.

Montagu's larger point was that happiness cannot remain private. If humanity truly is one family, then another person's suffering diminishes us all, while another person's joy enlarges our common life. Looking back across these three Independence Days, I realize that the happiest memories are not those in which I received something, but those in which happiness was shared. Perhaps that, too, is part of what Jefferson meant by the pursuit of happiness—not merely the freedom to seek fulfilment for ourselves, but the opportunity and responsibility to help create the conditions in which others may flourish as well.

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Earth Dance, the story of four generations of Balinese women, centers on conflicts that arise between the demands of caste and personal desires. Narrated by Ida Ayu Telaga, a Balinese woman in her thirties, the novel shows Balinese women—as shown by her mother, grandmother and female peers—to be motivated by two factors: the yearning to be beautiful, and the desire for a high-caste husband.

Headstrong Telaga defies her mother's wishes and marries the man of her dreams, who is a commoner. Thus, in a reversal of societal expectations, as shown in the novel by images of women who aspire to "liberation" through "marrying up," Telaga's emancipation is implicitly characterized as a move downwards, through transformation to the status of a commoner.

Earth Dance also reveals that—like high-caste status—beauty, too, has a price. Behind the thick, glossy hair and golden complexion, lies a web of jealousy, derision and intrigue. Telaga, whose life is controlled by her mother's avarice, her mother-in-law's bitterness and the greed of her sister-in-law, has frequent cause to wonder: "Is this what it means to be a woman?"

Surat dari Pejompongan

SABOTASE

Kawan Moer,

Aku telah membaca cerita pendek "Sabotase" karya Zubir A.A. di dua tempat. Pertama, dalam kumpulan *Api '26* (1961), dan kedua, dalam *Berpatju Matahari* (1964). Yang terakhir ini adalah buku kumpulan cerita pendek Zubir, sementara yang sebelumnya adalah bunga rampai dengan para penulis Lekra lainnya. Bagiku, ini adalah cerita pendek terbaik Zubir, baik dalam bunga rampai maupun dalam himpunan karyanya sendiri.

Zubir menulis "Sabotase" di Jakarta pada 1961. Cerita ini bersama cerita-cerita pendek lainnya dalam *Api '26* ditulis untuk merefleksikan peristiwa pemberontakan Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) di Banten pada November 1926 dan di Sumatra Barat pada Januari 1927. Jadi, ini semacam proyek bersama untuk membaca dan menafsirkan kembali peristiwa yang penting itu, terutama terkait peran PKI sebagai partai yang mengusung perlawanan kepada penjajah atau dengan semangat antikolonialisme.

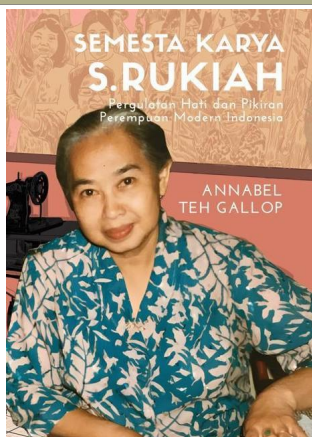
"Sabotase" segera menjadi cerita yang menarik karena pada dasarnya ia telah menjadi sebuah cerita. Ia tidak dibikin-bikin, katakanlah, agar kelihatan watak realisme-sosialisnya, atau watak perlawanannya terhadap kekuasaan. Ia sebuah cerita perlawanan, tentu saja, terhadap kekuasaan kolonial, dari perspektif anak remaja yang semula buta politik kemudian menjadi komunis setelah dididik oleh seorang aktivis bernama Simun.

Cerita ini dibuka dengan lukisan yang sangat hidup tentang bagaimana seorang anak berusia 16 tahun mencari pekerjaan. Ayahnya seorang buruh perkebunan tembakau milik Belanda yang dipenjara karena membunuh tuannya. Bukanlah kebetulan jika kemudian ia bertemu dengan Simun, seorang pemilik bengkel besi, yang adalah juga pemimpin gerakan buruh tembakau di sebuah kota kecil di Sumatra Utara itu.

Kalimat-kalimat Simun, terutama, memperlihatkan kecakapan Zubir dalam menulis cerita ini. Simun menjadi sosok yang tegas dan sedikit misterius, dan itu memang pelukisan yang hendak dicapai oleh Zubir dalam memasang tokoh pergerakan yang menyaru sebagai pandai besi. Tendensi didaktisme tentu saja muncul, tetapi memang sudah semestinya. Terutama ketika Simun justru meminta Pomo untuk belajar membaca dan menulis di sela-sela pekerjaannya di bengkel. "Belajar adalah salah satu dari kerjamu," kata Simun.

Dari situ Zubir perlahan-lahan memasukkan tokoh-tokoh lain yang adalah kawan-kawan seperjuangan Simun. Mulai dari Mandor perkebunan yang berpihak kepada buruh dan Djamat yang bertugas di arena perjudian kalangan buruh. Perkenalan dengan tokoh-tokoh lain juga membuat Pomo mendapatkan tugas tambahan sebagai kurir dan penjaga bengkel ketika para aktivis buruh itu sedang rapat di dalam.

UPCOMING EVENT



On Sunday, 23 August 2026, Logos ID will host a discussion and book launch centered on the literary legacy of Siti Rukiah (1927–1996), one of early independent Indonesia's most prolific women writers, active across the revolutionary and post-revolutionary literary scene of the 1950s and early 1960s. The featured speaker is Annabel Teh Gallop, Head of the Southeast Asia Section at the British Library and a leading authority on Malay manuscripts and letters.

The discussion will turn to Rukiah's works in *Api Kartini* magazine that has been digitized recently in Logos ID's *Pustaka Langka* initiative, alongside the novel and story collection that once earned her national literary honors before her creative career was cut short by the political upheavals of 1965–66.

The event will also mark the launch of Gallop's newest book, *Semesta Karya S. Rukiah: Pergulatan Hati dan Pikiran Perempuan Modern Indonesia*, published by Bara Books. Developed from her 1985 master's dissertation at SOAS, the book follows Rukiah's creative path and inner conflicts as a modern Indonesian woman writer, reading her fiction against the backdrop of revolution and its long aftermath, and recovering a literary voice long missing from the national narrative.

The venue for the discussion and book launch will be announced soon. Stay tuned for updates on Logos ID's Instagram: @logosid

For more information, contact Auf at +62 819-1802-2003.

Fokus kemudian bergeser kepada peran Pomo sebagai kurir dan pengirim barang-barang ke langganan Simun, antara bengkel dan pasar. Pasar dalam hal ini adalah etalase untuk membuka secara perlahan-lahan cerita tentang gerakan buruh yang semula berlangsung secara diam-diam itu. Di pasar itulah Pomo bertemu dengan Djamat yang ditangkap opas Belanda karena membakar bangsal tembakau. Cerita bergerak lagi kepada peristiwa pembakaran lain lagi, dan penangkapan susul-menyusul.

Perpisahan Pomo dari Simun yang mengungsi entah ke mana adalah titik tolak pemantapan pendirian Pomo sebagai komunis muda. Ia memang tidak menjadi buruh, tetapi ia memantapkan hatinya untuk meneruskan gerakan Simun dan kawan-kawan. Ia pun membakar bangsal tembakau, sebagai semacam penyambutan atas pemberontakan PKI di Sumatra Barat. Dengan aksi ini ia mau menegaskan telah lahir seorang komunis muda dengan program yang sama: melawan kapitalisme perkebunan tembakau.

Bung, aku selesai membaca cerita ini dengan satu kesimpulan begini: Memang, menjelang bagian akhir agak banyak Zubir mengeluarkan apa-apa yang selama ini dituding sebagai propaganda. Tidak sabar rasanya ia berhemat-hemat sebagaimana di bagian awal dan tengah. Dan makin di akhir makin kelihatan berlebihan. Misalnya, ketika Pomo memasang papan bertuliskan "Komunis" di pohon jati tidak jauh dari bangsal yang ia bakar. Padahal, jika tidak ada papan penanda ini pun cerita akan tetap bagus.

Heroisme di bagian akhir ini jadi mencederai pelukisan yang kuat-hemat di bagian awal dan tengah. Jika dua setengah paragraf penutup itu dibuang—terutama proklamasi sikap Pomo yang ditujukan kepada pembaca—akan bisa menyelamatkan cerita yang sudah mulai kedodoran di bagian akhir. Terutama oleh sikap rewel pengarang tentang kekomunisan pemuda Pomo.

Ah, Bung, apakah aku bisa berharap lebih dari karya-karya Zubir yang lain? Rasanya, tidak. Salam. **Zen Hae** (zenhae@lontar.org)

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