



Lontar Newsletter

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September 2026

Greetings

September 30 is an infamous date in Indonesian history, a sad one to be sure. But it is also International Translation Day—a day to celebrate the people who carry literature across linguistic borders and recognize the extraordinary act of making one culture legible to another.

The date was chosen in honor of St. Jerome, the patron saint of translators. In 2017, the United Nations General Assembly officially proclaimed September 30 International Translation Day, recognizing translation and interpreting as essential to communication and international understanding.

Indonesia already marks the occasion. The Himpunan Penerjemah Indonesia and other cultural and language institutions organize events, while publishers and translators in Indonesia and abroad continue to bring Indonesian literature to international readers.

But for a country as linguistically and culturally extraordinary as Indonesia, translation deserves a much more ambitious national effort. Why not proclaim September National Translation Month?

Indonesia is not simply a country with a literature written in one national language. Bahasa Indonesia emerged as a remarkable instrument of national unity among hundreds of linguistic communities. Alongside Indonesian stands a vast literary inheritance in Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Acehnese, Minangkabau, Bugis, Madurese, and many other languages. Much of this writing remains inaccessible not only to readers abroad but

Ruminations

The Lard Pail

In the late 1950s, or at least until the time my mother began using Crisco to deep-fry chicken and to mix with flour and water for the crumbly crusts of the pies she baked, lard was the cooking oil and shortening of choice at Glynnspring. This was evident from the number of lard pails on one of the shelves in the basement of our home. Our pails were not the colorful kinds produced by corporate giants like Armour and Hormel, but shiny, no-frills gallon tins provided by the combined slaughterhouse, rendering plant, and frozen food locker in LaValle, ten miles distant, where my parents rented freezer space for the beef and pork from the cows and pigs they had butchered each year. The Frigidaire chest freezer in our basement simply was not large enough to hold it all.

These plain tins were among the most useful objects on the farm. In one late spring, I recall, walking with my father through the woods, lard pails in hand, scouring each and every rotting tree stump in search of morels. Both our minds were on that night's meal when, after cleaning and then cutting the mushrooms in halves, Daddy would fry them in butter three or four minutes until golden brown and sprinkle them with salt.

In early summer, Mother might ask me to go to the garden and dig up a pailful of new potatoes for that evening's meal. In late summer, she would tell whatever children were around to gather blackberries from the bushes growing between the cornfield behind the barn and the hillside. "I need at least four pailfuls if I am to make a batch of jam." Since Mother made the best blackberry jam, we happily raced to do her bidding.

In autumn, when I and my siblings returned home from school, our father would send us to Falling Leaf, an area in the woods where there was a stand of hickory trees. "And don't you come back here until each of you has a pailful of hickory nuts." After our quest, we poured the nuts from our tins into the wooden bushel baskets that sat near the furnace in the basement to dry. During the winter months, Daddy spent many evenings patiently cracking the shells to extract the largest intact nutmeats that Mother used to decorate candies and cakes throughout the year.

On the eve of Halloween, those same lard pails became the containers for the Tootsie Rolls, Life Savers, bubble gum, popcorn balls,

even to Indonesians outside the communities in which it was produced.

Translation can therefore work in both directions: carrying Indonesian writing into the world while allowing the country's many literary traditions to speak to one another.

Indonesia has already demonstrated what government support can accomplish. In the lead-up to Indonesia's appearance as Guest of Honor at the 2015 Frankfurt Book Fair, the government established a translation funding program. The effort continued through Indonesia's participation as Market Focus Country at the 2019 London Book Fair. Considerable strides were made during those years in introducing Indonesian writers to international publishers and readers.

Then the program was disbanded, and translation support diminished. More recently, the newly established Ministry of Culture has launched a Literary Translation Lab Program—a welcome development, but one that should be the beginning of a much broader effort.

Indonesia needs sustained support for translation, including a stronger presence at international book fairs, the revival of a writers' residency program, and funding that enables foreign publishers to publish Indonesian literary works in translation.

A National Translation Month could provide an annual focus for bringing publishers, translators, writers, universities, libraries, cultural institutions, and government together around that goal.

Indonesia possesses extraordinary literary wealth. The challenge is no longer simply to preserve it, but to let the world read it—and to let Indonesians read more of one another.

September already gives us a reason to celebrate translation.

Why not give Indonesia a whole month?

Yuli Ismartono (yismartono@lontar.org)

and homemade cookies that homeowners in Cazenovia dropped into them after we shouted, "Trick or treat!"

Even during the winter, these pails were of use. When wrapped with crepe paper and ribbons, they became gift containers for Mother's fudge, seafoam candy, date-filled cookies and other treats that

would be distributed to neighbors and friends.

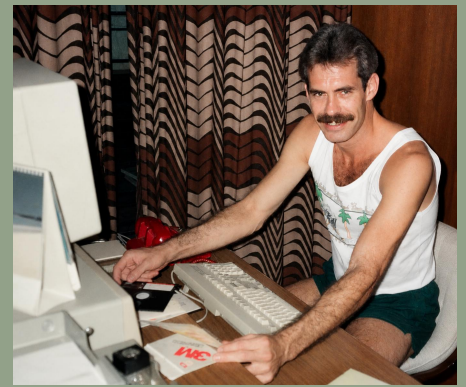
The lard pail was, throughout my younger years, a measure of success.

I was delighted when Pustaka Jaya published *A Taste of Betel and Lime*, my translation of a collection of poems by Indonesian women writers, in 1983. That same year Ohio University Press published my translation of S. Rukiah's novel *The Fall and the Heart*. Two more novels followed over the next four years, culminating in Louisiana State University Press's handsome hardcover edition of Ismail Marahimin's *And the War Is Over* in 1987.

Only later did I come to see these publications as serendipitous. In 1987, four Indonesian authors—Goenawan Mohamad, Sapardi Djoko Damono, Umar Kayam, and Subagio Sastrowardoyo—and I established the Lontar Foundation. Suddenly I found myself serving, unofficially, as its director of publications. I was no longer simply translating books, a task I thoroughly enjoyed whenever the work itself inspired me. Instead, I found myself having to master every step of the publishing process.

That had never been my plan. I had envisioned a lean organization that would commission translators to prepare English editions of works selected by our editorial board and then place those translations with established publishers abroad. I soon discovered, however, that with only a handful of exceptions, English-language publishers wanted only those books they believed were commercially promising—primarily novels. Poetry, short stories, essays, and plays—other genres of literary work essential to understanding the breadth of Indonesia's literary tradition—held little interest for them. Lontar therefore had little choice but to evolve from a translation agency into a publishing house.

The learning curve was steep. I, the only employee at the time, had no experience in publishing and almost every step had to be learned through experience. It took years before the foundation acquired the editorial, production, fundraising, and managerial capacity needed to become a sustainable organization. Fortunately, I was not alone in my idealism. With the assistance of an energetic executive director and a



At work in Lontar's first office, a miniscule bedroom in my home, in 1988.

A NEW VENUE!



Filosofi Literasi, a new venue for book lovers, recently opened at the iconic Sarinah department store in the heart of Jakarta, on Jalan Thamrin. Several racks of books there are devoted almost exclusively to Lontar titles.

Part bookstore, part café, and part meeting spot, this brainchild of Handoko Hendroyono represents an extension of his Filosofi Kopi chain of cafés, the inspiration for which can be traced to a short story of the same name. Authored by Dee Lestari, the story appeared in her 2005 collection of short prose, also titled *Filosofi Kopi*.

The story was made into a popular film starring Chicco Jerikho and Rio Dewanto in 2015. The film's production gave rise to the first Filosofi Kopi café, which occupied the film's Melawai set in Kebayoran Baru and opened to the public in April 2015, shortly before the film was released.



small group of dedicated colleagues—people willing to work for far less than they might have earned elsewhere—we gradually transformed Lontar into a respected institution.

For many years I judged my life by one published title at a time, believing that each new volume represented another measure of success.

Now, nearly forty years later, with a much-delayed retirement on the horizon where, I find myself thinking less about “success” than about meaning.

As a youngster I thought success could be weighed and carried in a pail. In my teens and twenties, I thought of grade-point averages, awards, and scholarships. In my middle years, I came to believe that success could be counted by the number of titles on a bookshelf, the frequency of invitations to speak at conferences, and the number of grants I secured. Now, at the age of 74, I am wondering if “success” is something that can be counted at all. Like those old lard pails—and later the books I helped bring into the world—I have come to think of myself less by the container than what it has held, what it has carried for others.

My mind goes back to a deliciously warm day in spring more than sixty years ago. I am in the woods at Glynnspring with my father, resting on one of those rotting tree stumps around whose base we had discovered a bounty of morels. Our lard pails are full. As we look down at the verdant valley below and the miniature home in which my family lives in the distance, he speaks as if to himself, not looking at me as his eyes scan the scene. “Our family has lived on this land for well over one hundred years. Yes, it is the family homestead but, even so, we are only its caretakers. And when our job is done, when we are no longer here, it should be left better than when we found it.”



Looking towards the family home at Glynnspring from the woods.

It wasn't until years later I came to understand that he was speaking not only of the farm.

And now, I am wondering about what happened to those lard pails, those containers that were valuable because they were always being filled and emptied in service of others.

John H. McGlynn (john.mcglynn@lontar.org)



Jennifer Lindsay first came to Indonesia from her birth country New Zealand in 1970 and has been returning to Indonesia in various guises ever since, including stints as researcher, Australian cultural attaché, and cultural officer (at the Ford Foundation).

Jennifer's academic writing focuses on Indonesian cultural history, performing arts, language and translation. She was contributing editor to *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian 1950-1965* (KITLV 2012) and directed *Menggelar Indonesia*, a documentary about Indonesia's cultural missions abroad in that era.

Active as translator from Indonesian since 1990, she translated Goenawan Mohamad's weekly *Tempo* column *Catatan Pinggir* into English for twenty years. She has also literary works by Linus Suryadi, Ashadi Siregar, and Leila Chudori, among others. As columnist, she contributed "Word Watch" about the Indonesian language to (the English) *Tempo* (2014-2018). Her essays are published in the *Sydney Review of Books*, *Mekong Review*, and *Australian Review of Books*.

In 2026, Jennifer branched out from academic writing, non-fiction, and translating the literary work of others, with her own novel; a work of historical fiction titled *The Editor* which follows the emotional journey of Sophia Raffles as she compiles the memoir of her late husband.

Webpage: jennifer-lindsay.com

Surat dari Pejompongan

KRAKATAU

Kawan Moer,

Bagaimana sebuah peristiwa alam mendorong seorang sastra untuk menulis karya sastra, tengoklah letusan Gunung Krakatau di Selat Sunda. Gunung purba ini tentu sudah berkali-kali meletus. Yang paling diingat orang adalah letusan pada 26-27 Agustus 1883. Namun, sejak 1927 gunung ini batuk-batuk beberapa kali. Letusan Januari 1928 menghasilkan kemunculan Anak Gunung Krakatau dari Kaldera Krakatau.

Banyak tulisan tentang letusan Krakatau dan bagaimana letusan itu memengaruhi iklim dan kehidupan pada masanya. Namun, letusan 1928 itu justru mendorong Kwee Tek Hoay untuk menulis cerita *Drama dari Krakatau*. Ini sebenarnya fiksi panjang yang dimuat secara bersambung sejak 7 April hingga 22 Desember 1928 di mingguan *Panorama*, tempat Kwee bekerja sebagai salah satu redaktornya. Namun, karya ini juga sudah berkali-kali dimainkan sebagai pertunjukan tonil.

Kata *drama* pada judul ceritan itu mesti dilihat sebagai kata kunci, sebab sejatinya Kwee memang menghadirkan drama percintaan, drama keluarga, di tengah bencana yang tengah melanda. Yakni, percintaan Asisten Wedana Raden Moelia dan Retna Sari, anak pendeta Noesa Brahma. Dan bagaimana sejarah keluarga mereka terungkap kemudian.

Singkat kata, drama percintaan mencapai konflik ketika Abdul Sintir, seorang lelaki yang mencintai Retna Sari, menculik kekasih Raden Moelia dan ibunya. Sintir membawa ibu dan anak itu dengan perahu menuju Lampung. Ketika perahu mendekati Gunung Krakatau, saat itulah gunung tersebut meletus. Perahu mereka karam, sejumlah korban mengapung-apung di laut. Retna Sari dan ibunya selamat. Raden Moelia yang kemudian menyusul dengan perahu, menyelamatkan mereka.

Supaya cerita lebih seru, Bung, tentu ada misteri yang mesti diungkapkan pada Retna Sari. Dia ini bukan sembarang gadis dusun. Setelah diusut-usut melalui perhiasan yang dipakainya dan foto-foto keluarganya, ternyata, dia adalah anak dari Soerjati, bibi Raden Moelia, yang berpisah dari saudaranya, Hasan, Raden Adipati Hasan di Ningrat, ayah Raden Moelia, saat letusan Gunung Krakatau 1883.

Belum cukup. Sekarang giliran riwayat pendeta Noesa Brama yang disingkapkan oleh pengarang. Pendeta ini sebenarnya seorang Raja terakhir dari Kerajaan Pakuan Padjajaran yang menguasai wilayah Banten. Nama aslinya Sri Paduka Maharaja Prabu Wastu Kencana. Dengan kata lain, Soerjati adalah Permaisuri dan Retna Sari adalah Putri Mahkota.

Begitulah, Kwee sebenarnya tengah memainkan drama percintaan kaum bangsawan. Tokoh utama cerita belum bisa diserahkan kepada

IN MEMORIAM



Anton Kurnia in 2015

ANTON KURNIA, passed away on Friday, September 18, 2026. Born in Bandung in 1974, he was a writer, translator, and editor whose work extended far beyond his own books.

In recent years, Anton was closely associated with Jakarta's literary institutions, serving as Chair of the Literature Committee of the Jakarta Arts Council and Director of the Jakarta International Literary Festival. These were not merely administrative roles. He worked to bring literature into contact with readers, writers, translators, thinkers, and the wider international community.

Anton wrote short stories, novels, essays, and narrative nonfiction. His 2023 collection, *Nostalgia*, was selected by *Tempo* magazine as one of the year's best works of fiction. He also translated writers including James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, and Salman Rushdie, and served on the National Book Committee from 2016 to 2019.

Anton understood literature as more than the writing of books. He helped build the institutions and conversations that allow literature to flourish—organizing festivals, editing books, translating works, connecting people, and opening doors.

His was often a quiet kind of work, sometimes frustrating and rarely lucrative, but necessary because, as the obituary reminds us, human beings need words to understand their lives.

Farewell, Anton.

orang kebanyakan. Ini sebuah model cerita borjuis yang tidak mengizinkan orang kebanyakan mengamil alih peran utama. Tentu saja, ada penghiburan dan kita bisa menerima itu dari awal cerita. Ada seorang pendeta di tepi perkampungan Badui yang hidup secara misterius, menolak modernita yang tengah melanda Hindia Belanda saat itu.

Pendeta dan anaknya yang cantik, lingkungannya yang asri di puncak Gunung Ciwalirang, membuat aku merasa cerita ini akan bergeser kepada langgam cerita silat. Ternyata tidak. Ini hanyalah sekadar kamuflase nasib kaum bangsawan yang tengah menjalani nasib buruk di dunia, untuk selanjutnya pengarang akan mengembalikan martabat mereka yang mulia seperti sedia kala.

Bahkan, kekuasaan dewa-dewa pun masih punya peran di sini. Bayangkan, bencana meletusnya Krakatau pada 1928 itu bisa direkayasa sebagai upaya Noesa Brama dalam mencegah upaya jahat Abdul Sintir tadi. Dia tentu saja tidak bisa melawan upaya jahat Sintir secara langsung atau dengan tenaganya sendiri, tetapi ia meminta bantuan dewa-dewa untuk membuat gunung di tengah lautan itu meletus.

Di sini, Kwee juga memainkan kembali kekuatan agama terhadap nasib manusia dan alam raya. Di tempat pertapaan Noesa Brama di Gunung Ciwalirang itu ada patung Dewa Wisnu yang kemudian rusak. Salah satu inskripsinya memuat kutukan dewa-dewa terhadap manusia, melalui tingkah polah Krakatau.

Namun, di akhir cerita Kwee mencoba agak bijak. Ia menempatkan bencana sebagai semacam konfrontasi yang terus-menerus antara kerusakan dan keselamatan. Ia tidak menjatuhkan pilihannya, tetapi meminta pembaca memilih sendiri siapa pemenang dalam konfrontasi itu.

Aku senang mengikuti cara Kwee Tek Hoay menutup cerita, meski secara alur, ada kesan semua yang masih terasa misterius di awal dan tengah cerita, akan disingkapkan pada akhirnya. Agak royal dia memberi pengungkapan rahasia demi rahasia. Kukira, dia tidak ingin menyusahkan pembaca, Bung. Dia pengarang yang murah hati.

Itu saja dariku. Salam. **Zen Hae** (zenhae@lontar.org)

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