Lontar Newsletter

Email: contact@lontar.org

October 2026

Greetings

It is with pleasure that I announce that John McGlynn, a Lontar co-founder and its long-serving director of publications, was named recipient of the 2026 Ubud Writers and Readers Festival Lifetime Achievement Award. At the festival's opening ceremony on October 21, Janet DeNeefe, UWRF founder and director, presented John with the award.

In John's acceptance speech, he observed: "I feel that this award properly belongs not to me, but to the many translators with whom I have had the privilege of working over the years—the scores of translators who have worked with Lontar to bring the literary works of hundreds of Indonesian authors into English. To all the translators who have worked with Lontar, this award is for you. I accept it on your behalf, with gratitude and affection."

In those words, John captured both the essence of Lontar's mission—that of promoting Indonesian literature abroad—and of its greatest challenges: building a community of translators who are committed to achievement of this goal.

There is no shortage of Indonesian literary works deserving a wider audience, nor of potential literary translators. The hurdle, however—one that Lontar has had to jump over constantly since its founding in 1987—is finding sufficient funds to pay translators fairly for the time, skill, and dedication their work demands. Without adequate compensation, it is difficult to attract and retain the talented translators on whom our mission depends.

In the United States, Giving Tuesday,

Ruminations

Once Upon a Ship

Having grown up in the Midwestern United States, where passenger ships were virtually nonexistent—the exceptions being the ferries that crisscross Lake Michigan and Lake Superior—I didn't travel aboard one until September 1976.

My first voyage was a three-day passage aboard the *Tampomas II*, from Tanjung Priok in Jakarta to Belawan Harbor in Medan. I was traveling with Virginia "Nina" Crockett and we were on our way to Medan, from where we would go overland to Lake Toba. Looking at the hulking, weary ship, I wondered whether the many hundreds of restless ticket-holders on the dock would find space aboard. The thought soon vanished as we struggled to reach the second deck. (Only years later, when the ship sank in the Java Sea in 1981, killing 666 passengers, did I shudder at the thought of being trapped aboard a sinking vessel without a life vest.)

The *Tampomas II* was a city on the water. Idul Fitri was approaching—just two weeks away, on September 25—and vendors from cities such as Yogyakarta and Jakarta, perhaps natives of North Sumatra, were heading home to their villages, bringing wares to sell to help offset their fares. Prices were steep, as might be expected. Bargaining was difficult: you couldn't exactly walk away and try the next shop down the street.

The WCs stank to high heaven. I avoided them by sneaking into the first-class *kamar mandi* on the upper deck. Because of my white face, no doubt, no one stopped me. I'm not sure what I would have done if they had.

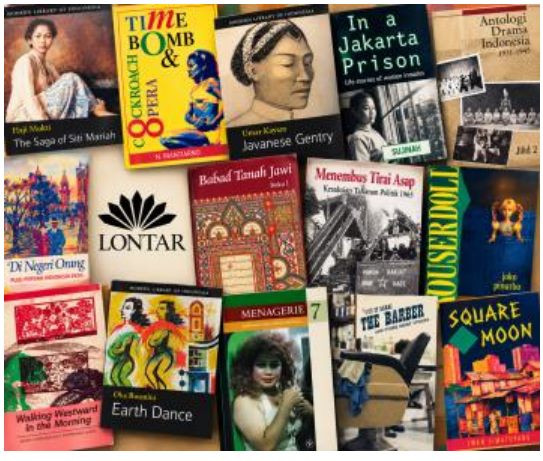
The constant mist on this inaugural ocean voyage was most annoying; it felt like a sticky film of sweat that never quite went away. But that was preferable to the intense heat inside the cabin below. Most passengers had boarded before Nina and me, filling the cabin and leaving us no choice but to find a corner of the open deck to sleep. Who could have slept below anyway? In that cramped, stuffy space, the smell of urine and feces wafted through the air, gliding along the floor in search of an exit through an open porthole or stairwell.

On the morning of our second day at sea, I awoke with Nina beside me. She asked whether I remembered my bodily movements during the

which falls on December 1 this year, encourages individuals and organizations to support the nonprofit causes they believe in. Why not make this a tradition in Indonesia as well? Through Myriad USA, American taxpayers can make tax-deductible donations to Lontar. Here in Indonesia, cultural organizations still struggle to secure the financial support their work deserves. We need to change that, but we cannot wait for a better funding environment to emerge.

The year ahead will be one of transition for Lontar. With John planning to retire as director of publications in 2027, we must strengthen our financial footing now to ensure that the transition is smooth and that our literary translation program continues without interruption.

Lontar has spent nearly four decades bringing Indonesian literature to the wider world. That work belongs not to one individual, but to all of us who believe these writers deserve to be read beyond Indonesia's borders. Please make a donation to Lontar before the end of the year. Your generosity will help us compensate translators fairly, bring more Indonesian voices to international readers, and carry this vital work into the future.



Yuli Ismartono (yismartono@lontar.org)

night—what I had been doing with my arms, legs, and hands. When I shook my head, she asked, "Are you sure you're not straight?"

Ships, like many things, are made up of layers. Structurally, there are the holds and engine rooms at the bottom, the lower decks above them, and the control room at the top. The same can be said of people.

The *Tampomas II* was no luxury liner. Nonetheless, it divided its passengers into strata defined by how much they wanted—or were able—to spend. At the bow, separated from the rear by gates, was first class. At the rear was what might be called the "Barat," or Western settlement, occupied by young Australians, French, Germans, and other foreigners whom Indonesians called hippies. This was the 1970s, remember, and judging by their appearance, they were just that.



With classmates at IKIP Malang in 1976: Rebecca [Surname unknown], on the left and Virginia "Nina" Crockett on the right.

There were a few Indonesians in this section, too, but I sensed they had been pushed to the top, like the result of a yeast reaction, for lack of anywhere else to go—and because they could afford it. Nina and I occupied the deck between the upper and lower levels. We had the means to avoid the lowest deck, where most passengers stayed, but not enough to join the upper echelon.

I was often made uncomfortable by Indonesians' comments and questions about foreigners. Yet I was even more put off by the indifference toward Indonesia among the foreigners on the upper decks, where I sometimes sneaked in. I felt embarrassed at having to disown my Western "brethren" when others commented on them.

I was also sometimes overwhelmed by the naiveté of the Indonesians I encountered. I heard assumptions, even prejudices, voiced as facts. Of course, our cultures differed, but was that a bad thing? Couldn't we be different and still *menyesuaikan diri*—adjust ourselves to the situation—or compromise when necessary? Shouldn't we be able to get along?

The *Tampomas II* was a world in miniature, its passengers divided by class, nationality, and assumptions about one another. I was conscious of these divisions even as I questioned their validity. At the time, I thought adjustment meant learning to live in a society whose customs and expectations differed from my own. Looking back fifty years later, I realize the question was more complicated than I understood then. How much should one accommodate the expectations of others? At what point

UPCOMING EVENT

Literature has long served as a bridge between cultures, carrying stories, memories, and ideas across geographical boundaries. This November, the Korea-Indonesia Connection at the University of Indonesia presents "Literature Beyond Borders," bringing together authors, translators, and scholars to explore how stories travel beyond their origins and acquire new meanings in different cultural contexts.

Through a series of discussions, the event will examine social memory and the ways Korean literature engages with the shadows of history. Other conversations will explore how translated works reflect social and political change, the art of conveying meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries, and the role of literary exchange in fostering cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.

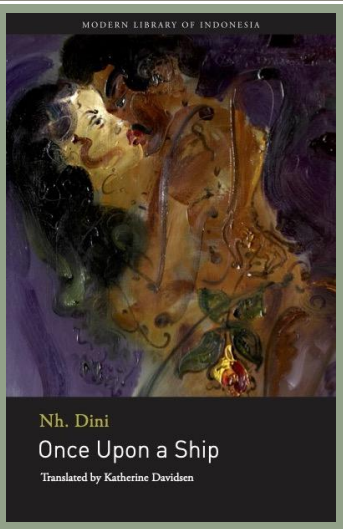
The keynote and panel sessions will take place on Wednesday, 11 November 2026, from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Participants can also enjoy a silent reading corner from 11 to 13 November, featuring a selection of books, and join a special book club session on Friday, 13 November. These activities offer an opportunity to reflect on the discussions and consider how every book is part of a complex exchange between languages and cultures.

Lontar is pleased to support the event as a collaborator, with John McGlynn participating as a panel speaker. Lontar will also contribute books to the reading corner in celebration of literature in translation.

Go to linktr.ee/kicfisipui for further information.

does compromise mean surrendering something essential to oneself?



The cover of *Once Upon a Ship*.

These questions returned decades later when I reread Nh. Dini's *Pada Sebuah Kapal* first published in 1973, then translated into English and published by Lontar in 2022 as *Once Upon a Ship*. The novel is regarded as one of Dini's finest works. Publishing its English translation was part of Lontar's effort to bring Indonesian literature to readers beyond Indonesia. But my response was not exclusively literary I recognized something of my own experience in its portrayal of Sri, the novel's main protagonist, who, as an Indonesian living in the West, was negotiating unfamiliar circumstances and accommodating others' expectations while trying to preserve her sense of who she was.

Over the decades, I have grown accustomed to questions that reflect assumptions about the life I should be leading. Why have I never married? Why do I not have children? I have learned to respond obliquely, deflecting such questions without necessarily answering them. I seldom feel the need to make an issue of these encounters. When Nina, being coy, asked whether I was sure I wasn't straight, I laughed. It was a familiar response to a question that might otherwise have seemed intrusive.

There is nothing especially dramatic about this, nor is it peculiar to a foreigner living in Indonesia. We all learn, in different ways, to negotiate the space between what others expect to hear and what we choose to reveal.

I am not suggesting that adapting to Indonesia has meant concealing myself, any more than remaining myself has meant resisting every influence of the society in which I have lived. Living here has changed me. I have learned to compromise, recognize differences in outlook, and sometimes let a question pass with a laugh rather than an explanation. But I have also tried to retain a sense of myself that does not depend on other people's approval or understanding.

Now, fifty years since I first set foot on these shores, I still have no definitive answer to how far one should adjust. I am less certain than I once was that adjustment and self-preservation are opposites. The challenge may be to let the place in which one lives change one's life without allowing it—or anyone else—to determine entirely who one becomes.

John H. McGlynn (john_mcglynn@lontar.org)

FEATURED TRANSLATOR



Matthew Isaac Cohen

MATTHEW ISAAC COHEN is a professor in the Department of Dramatic Arts at the University of Connecticut and a Guggenheim Fellow in Theatre and Performance Studies. A scholar of Indonesian theatrical practices and traditions, he performs *wayang kulit* on occasion under the name Kanda Buwana ("Storyteller of the World"), a name given to him the royal court of Kacirebonan, in Cirebon, West Java.

Cohen was a Fulbright scholar at the arts conservatory Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta in the late 1980s; conducted his doctoral fieldwork on *wayang kulit* in the Cirebon area in the 1990s; and researched the history of Indonesian popular theatre and live entertainment starting around 1998. His monograph *Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia* (2016) was researched and drafted as a research fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Among his translations are *Demon Abduction: A Wayang Ritual Drama from West Java*, published by Lontar in 1999, and the 2010 play anthology, *The Lontar Anthology of Indonesian Drama, Volume 1: Plays for the Popular Stage (1890–1960)*.

He is currently completing a two-volume history of wayang puppetry in Indonesia which revolves around the Collection of Indonesian Puppets at Yale University the largest wayang collection in the world.

Surat dari Pejompongan

BALFAS

Kawan Moer,

Ketika mengadakan riset untuk sebuah bunga rampai cerita pendek Indonesia beberapa tahun lalu, aku secara sungguh-sungguh membaca karya M. Balfas. Tentu saja nama ini sudah kukenal jauh-jauh hari, terutama ia sebagai pengarang dari Angkatan 45 yang hampir seluruh cerita pendeknya berfokus kepada Revolusi Indonesia. Yang kumaksud di sini adalah kumpulan ceritanya *Lingkaran-Lingkaran Retak* (Balai Pustaka, 1952).

Ketika membaca buku ini aku langsung tertarik kepada ceritanya yang pertama "Anak Revolusi". Dari judulnya saja kau pasti sudah tahu bahwa ini adalah cerita tentang Revolusi Indonesia—sebagaimana kuceritakan pada suratku beberapa waktu lalu. Bedanya adalah Balfas memasang tokoh anak-anak—satu keputusan yang jarang dilakukan oleh para pengarang yang umumnya orang-orang dewasa di kala itu.

Meskipun di sini anak-anak tidak mengambil alih sudut pandang penceritaan, kehadirannya sebagai tokoh utama cerita sudah membuat kita harap-harap cemas. Apa yang dialami anak-anak seperti Ama—tokoh utama cerita tersebut—selama masa perang adalah serangkaian peristiwa yang tidak mengenakkan. Pertama, mereka terpaksa putus sekolah karena perang di mana-mana. Kedua, mereka menderita dampak buruk perang, dalam hal ini kemiskinan, pengungsian dan sebagainya.

Balfas tentu saja tidak bisa menghindarkan anak-anak dari semua dampak buruk itu, tetapi ia berusaha membuat tokoh anak-anak itu sebagai anak-anak yang kuat. Bukan dalam arti memahlawankan—sebagaimana orang miskin dalam kisah-kisah yang ditulis pengarang kiri kita—tapi membuat anak-anak sebagai korban Revolusi sekaligus yang mampu bertahan dalam situasi yang serba-sulit. Anak-anak yang putus sekolah itu misalnya harus membantu ibu mereka mencari uang. Apalagi ketika ibunya itu seorang janda.

Anak-anak di sini dipaksa menjadi dewasa sebelum waktunya. Mesti mencari uang dan menjadi bapak untuk adiknya yang masih kecil. Salah satu jalan yang ditempuh Ama adalah menjadi pedagang segala macam barang yang bisa diuangkan. Kadang-kadang—ini yang agak rawan—ia menjadi calo untuk tentara Sekutu yang hendak berkencan dengan perempuan. Ini adalah situasi yang semestinya tidak dialami oleh anak-anak, tentu saja, tetapi Balfas berusaha memotret setajam mungkin apa-apa yang terjadi pada anak-anak di Jakarta masa itu.

Setelah terombang-ambing oleh keadaan sulit itu, Balfas akhirnya mengembalikan Ama kepada kodratnya sebagai anak-anak yang penuh harapan. Di akhir cerita Balfas membukakan kesempatan bagi Ama untuk masuk sekolah lagi. Bagaimanapun akhirnya anak-anak tetaplah subjek

IN MEMORIAM



Kay Ikranagara in 2022

KAY IKRANAGARA was born and raised in the United States until 1957, when her father, the economist J. Bruce Glassburner, joined the joint University of California–University of Indonesia Economics Project, bringing the family to Jakarta.

In 1960, she returned to the United States to pursue a master's degree in linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. After conducting fieldwork in Jakarta, she completed her PhD in linguistics at the East-West Center, University of Hawaii.

Kay returned to Indonesia in 1969. While working on the Stanford program on language planning in Jakarta, she met and married the Indonesian playwright and director Ikranagara. They had two sons, Innosanto and Biko.

Over the following years, Kay held a variety of positions, most of them related to educational development and educational exchange.

She authored several papers and books on Indonesian linguistics, including a grammar of Betawi, the dialect spoken in Jakarta, published by Balai Pustaka in 1988. Most recently, she compiled and translated, together with Cobina Gillitt, six of her husband's political and abstract plays. Titled *Era of the Bat*, the book was published by Lontar in 2024.

Kay's broad smile, sparkling eyes, and generosity were legendary. She was a model for us all.

yang masih perlu pendidikan dan bimbingan orang tua. Masa depan mereka masih jauh. Pahit-getir masa revolusi biarlah menjadi pengalaman kanak-kanak yang bisa menjadi bahan cerita buat generasi berikutnya.

Balfas, dengan bahasa Indonesianya yang baik, memberi kita sejumlah cerita dengan latar Revolusi yang beragam. Seorang gadis buta yang jatuh cinta dan ditinggal kekasihnya pada akhirnya memilih bunuh diri dengan terjun ke dalam sumur. Ini satu keputusan yang lebih getir yang ditempuh oleh seorang gadis buta dalam cerita "Lagu Gandrung". Bunuh diri anak-anak adalah pokok soal yang tidak setiap pengarang saat itu bisa menuliskannya. Atau, anak-anak dari perkawinan di luar nikah antara perempuan setempat dan tentara Belanda dalam cerita "Tuan Jakup" menjalani hidupnya dengan segala rupa derita dengan komedi di sana-sini. Hasrat menjangkau kehormatan sebagai anak blasteran pada akhirnya mesti kandas. Jakup mesti menerima kenyataan bahwa ia sebenarnya adalah anak kampung belaka dan berjodoh dengan gadis kampung pula.

Aku menyukai cara Balfas bercerita, Bung. Kukira di antara para pengarang dari lingkaran Chairil Anwar, Balfas adalah salah satu pengarang yang punya kemampuan bercerita secara hemat kata dan bahasa Indonesia yang menggugah. Ia tidak meromantisasi penderitaan, tetapi menyelam ke kedalaman dan memberikan kesadaran baru bagi pembaca bahwa penderitaan itu pada akhirnya memperkuat jiwa manusia yang mengalaminya. Sayangnya, Balfas tidak menulis cerita-cerita yang lebih panjang. "Si Gomar" yang digadang-gadang sebagai fragmen dari roman yang tengah digarapnya, berhenti sebagai cerita panjang saja.

Sekali waktu, perlu juga kubicarakan tokoh ini dengan lebih mendalam. Ya, tentu aku mesti membaca lagi karya-karya Balfas yang lain. Sejauh bahan dan waktunya cukup, akan nyamanlah semua itu.

Itu saja dariku, Bung. Salam dari kota yang mulai kebagian hujan rintik-rintik. **Zen Hae** (zenhae@lontar.org)

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