

## BOOK REVIEWS

# Beyond the Horizon

## *Short Stories From Contemporary Indonesia*

David Hill, Editor

VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA  
MONASH ASIA INSTITUTE, 1998  
201 PAGES

Teaching about Indonesia can be a daunting task. The world's fourth most populous country, and the one with the most Muslims, has more than 300 separate cultures and languages on a diverse archipelago of more than 14,000 islands in the South Seas. The notion of "Indonesia" itself is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to the 1940s. Compared to other large Asian nations, we seem to bring limited general knowledge (and textbook coverage) to Indonesia and her peoples. So how do we get beyond the towering mountain peaks of stories about forest fires burning out of control, economic collapse, and street disorders in the post-Suharto era, to get into the valleys where the people live, to gain an understanding of family and village life and that which is distinctive about some of the peoples and cultures of modern Indonesia? How do we go beyond a generalized overview to show some of the ways that modernization and headlong economic globalization have transformed traditional life?

One way is to employ dramatic narratives—fiction, memoir, drama, verse—and a new compilation from Australia, *Beyond the Horizon: Short Stories From Contemporary Indonesia*, speaks to some of these concerns. The twenty-two short stories were first published between 1968 and 1992, many in *Horison* magazine. *Horison* emerged out of the bloody 1965–66 period and, while none of the stories selected by editor David Hill was ever banned by the New Order government of Suharto, the magazine and many of the stories represent the voices of a younger and more female new generation of Indonesian writers, some of whom address controversial themes and are sharply critical of aspects of modern life and rapid national economic development.

Many of the short stories, while not overtly political, deal with social issues such as the urban-rural gap, materialism and the disappearance of family and village rites, the exploitation of women, and the power of corrupt officialdom. "Coming Home" by Wildan Yatim and Putu Wijaya's "A Letter" deal with the pain of separation. "Jakarta" by Totilawati Tjitrawasita is one of several stories that contrast harsh yet inevitable city life with the fundamental decency, simplicity, and constancy of village life. Some of the stories also make pointed references to the environmental damage wrought in the name of rapid growth; in "Long Life for Mr. Joyokoyoroyo and his Cronies," by Hamsad Rangkuti, a lowly driver assassinates an official who has been involved in "letters promising forest concessions, bills of sale for islands, bills of sale for coastlines and mountains," auctioned off to "our foreign guests."

While some of the stories effectively lampoon institutionalized power, both corporate and governmental, perhaps the one most on-the-edge politically was Sides Sudyarto's 1977 story "The Lebaran Prayers of a Group of Political Prisoners in a Concentration Camp," which, while dealing with universalist themes like hope, redemption, and moral relativism among the incarcerated in an unnamed country, nevertheless ran the risk of provoking a regime that had tens of thousands of long-term political detainees.

Perhaps because the emergence of the short story genre has been recent in the Indonesian cultural tradition, the stories in *Beyond the Horizon* tend to be straightforward and unadorned, while at the same time creative, irreverent, and even surreal. While representing many voices and moods, the stories as a group do seem to share a sense of loss and regret.

With regard to classroom application, some of the stories probably need context and background by way of introduction to student readers. Others may be inappropriate for the precollegiate classroom due to mature themes and language. That said, *Beyond the Horizon* is a rich, lively, and powerful collection, and a welcome addition to the growing volume of literature which helps us to see into the valleys where the people live in this complex and fascinating country. ■

**NED FARMAN** is the History Department Head at Morristown-Beard School in New Jersey. He was a 1997 Fulbright-Hays scholar in Indonesia.

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