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Indonesia

by Bruce Grant

MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS, THIRD EDITION, 1996
248 PAGES

"Contemporary history is hard to write with assurance." This is the opening statement in Bruce Grant's chapter on "future" in *Indonesia*. Recent events in that country would certainly support Grant's assertion. The book was first published in 1964 and this edition, while extensively revised, retains the readability and sympathy for its subject that made the original version a success.

Although Indonesia is the largest Islamic country and the fourth most populous country in the world, it generally gets short shrift in the secondary school and university curricula. Grant offers a good, well written introduction to this often ignored part of the world that provides valuable information for instructors at both levels.

The book is divided into twelve chapters. The first chapter gives a historic overview, and Grant points out that "like so many nations created artificially by the European colonial powers, Indonesia had to set about imagining itself as a community after it became independent, in order to create itself as a modern nation."

Much of the second chapter is devoted to the Sukarno era. The October 1, 1965 communist-led attack on the army leadership in Jakarta and its indelible impression on subsequent Indonesian history is clearly examined, as is the whole issue of East Timor. Grant is adept at giving understandable explanations of complex events and their implications.

Chapter three looks at Sukarno and Suharto in a sympathetic but reasonably objective manner. Despite serious recent problems, Indonesia has clearly made great strides as a nation under both these men. In this chapter and in chapters four, five, six and twelve, Grant gives tantalizing glimpses of B. J. Habibie, but never enough to form a clear impression. Not being prescient is one of the difficulties faced by the contemporary historian. It would be nice to know more about Habibie, the man who has currently inherited a troubled economy along with the Presidential title.

There are brief looks at the place of the army in Indonesia, both historically and currently. It is, says Grant, "... the self-appointed promoter and guardian of Indonesian nationalism." In the culture chapter, Grant gives a discussion of Pancasila as well as examining the importance of *adat* (custom) as a unifying factor among the diverse islands and peoples that are Indonesia. This chapter is the least satisfying in the book because it is so difficult to capture the diverse rich cultures of this complex mix of peoples. Their art, music, and literature cannot be justly described briefly.

The view of Indonesian culture is augmented by the most interesting chapter, the one titled "People." Here the author identifies men and women from different strata of society, from a variety of locales, and has them comment on how they view their country and their life. In the introduction he explains that these conversations are an amalgam of his interviews with many people and do not represent the exact views of a single individual. Even though the sampling technique may not be truly representative, this chapter shows how some Indonesians really see

themselves, their country, and the future. These interviews have been updated, and this version is still as fascinating as the earlier edition.

Chapter 11 discusses Indonesia's foreign policy, past and present. Its interesting relationship with Australia is explored in some depth.

The final chapter discusses Indonesia and the future. The problems with a successor to Suharto are discussed. The author did not really predict the grave economic and political difficulties with which Suharto and Habibie have had to contend, nor was Grant sure that Habibie would be Suharto's successor.

The book includes a useful glossary, bibliography and index. While, in the author's words, it is not "scholarly" (there are no footnotes), the book is easy to read and would provide the high school teacher or survey-level university instructor with a firm background and perhaps the impetus to make Indonesia a part of the curriculum over and above a "current event" mention. ■

Thomas Bibler

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Black Clouds over the Isle of Gods and Other Modern Indonesian Short Stories

Translated and Edited by David M. E. Roskies

ARMONK, NEW YORK: M. E. SHARPE, 1997
223 PAGES

Black Clouds over the Isle of Gods



and Other Modern Indonesian Short Stories

Translated and edited by
David M.E. Roskies

The short story is "by far the favored prose form" in Indonesia, David M. E. Roskies tells us in the introduction to this collection (p. xiii). There he discusses also the dilemmas of translation, as well as the major historical events and conditions that inform these stories of the late twentieth century—the revolution for Indonesia's independence, the 1965 coup and its cataclysmic aftermath, the wide-spread ambivalence about development, and a bureaucratic, authoritarian state. Roskies imagines his readers as persons interested in

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"the real foundations of modern Indonesian life," those who want to look behind or beneath the surfaces a tourist might capture with a camcorder (p. xviii).

Paired with the author's useful introduction, a section of notes and comments closes the book. These valuable sketches on each of the eighteen writers introduce the reader to some of Indonesia's best known authors of contemporary fiction, including Idrus, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Achdiat Karta Mihardja, A. A. Navis, Nasjah Djamin, Satyagraha Hoerip, Nh. Dini, Taufiq Ismail, Putu Wijaya, Danarto, and Putu Oka Sukanta. References to the writers' other major works provide entree to a wider literature. Only through Roskies's notes and comments, in fact, will most students understand what is especially "Indonesian" about these works.

Roskies selected some stories to evince the figural realism that is the mainstream in modern Indonesian fiction, that is, writing that presumes a "belief in the efficacy and truthfulness of words" (p. 203). Pramoedya's "For Hire" fits into this category, vignettes about poverty and murder told through the eyes of a young boy whose life is privileged by comparison to that of the tragic family he describes. "Three Tales from the Occupation," by Idrus, short-short stories also in the realist mode, set off the "honeyed words" of Japanese propaganda against a deadly backdrop of starvation and conscription.

Other writers strike an avant-garde pose, parodying life rather than simply imitating it, or inciting "mental terror" by eliding the line between nightmare and reality. In Satyagraha Hoerip's "The Last Train But One," a young man gradually realizes that he is trapped aboard a train with an endless corridor, and bound for Eternity.

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