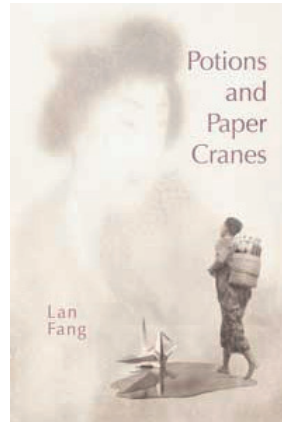


HISTORY IN YOUR FACE

FICTION, when well-written, can be more powerful than factual texts. The story as it unfolds, is absorbed into your subliminal consciousness and, you remember it for a long time, in some cases, even involuntarily. So, if young people are no longer attracted to history books, then let them at least learn what happened in our past through historical fiction. Better still, if these stories are made available to a wider readership beyond national borders.

A new independent publisher in California, USA, Dalang Publishing, has shown its commitment in this endeavour by publishing English translation and rendition of Indonesia's historical novels. After the success of the English rendition of Remy Sylado's *Namaku Mata Hari*, by Dewi Anggraeni with the title *My Name is Mata Hari*, Dalang has just brought out the translation of Lan Fang's *Perempuan Kembang Jepun*, by Elisabet Titik Murtisari with the title *Potions and Paper Cranes*, to be launched on January 18, 2014 in San Francisco.

The story spans between 1941 and 2003, set mostly in Surabaya and its immediate surrounding rural villages and smaller towns. From time to time it takes you, fleetingly, to Kyoto, Japan. The main protagonist, Lestari, a woman of 60, first appears on the scene shrouded in mystery, unfulfilled desire for happiness and deeply buried mental trauma and visible scars. She only appears real, in the immediate 'now' while the world around her is obscured by layers of dark veils. Even in this narrow strip of 'now', her movement, her behaviour and her interaction with the only other human being visible to the reader—her ter-



POTIONS AND PAPER CRANES

TRANSLATED IN ENGLISH BY ELISABET TITIK MURTISARI, FROM *PEREMPUAN KEMBANG JEPUN* BY LAN FANG
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PAPERBACK, 250 PAGES

minally-ill father—strikes you as somewhat surreal.

The layers are peeled off slowly, one by one, by separate accounts from the other protagonists: Sulis, a *jamu* (herbal potions) seller; Sujono, Lestari's father (also husband of Sulis); Tjoa Kim Hoa and Matsumi, a Japanese woman. The story which eventually emerges sounds likely and unlikely all at once, but very humanly feasible nonetheless. All the main personages who are also protagonists, are flawed to varying degrees, each one tugs at your heart at different stages, but none is totally likeable. So this is certainly not a fairy tale or a popular romance. In fact, except for the ending, it has the fatalism of a Greek tragedy, and the harrowing qualities of a Thomas Hardy.

Presenting a story by drawing it from different angles is not new, but not every writer who tries succeeds in making it coherent.

The very engaging story takes place in Indonesia, in a maelstrom of wars of indepen-

dence against Dutch colonial administration and Japanese occupation, where extreme poverty and privileges juxtapose, where abuse of power is a daily occurrence not merely between the politically powerful on the one hand and the powerless and the oppressed on the other, but also between the strong and the weak in every sense of the words and in every walk of life.

Sulis who has always lived in abject poverty, grabs at anything which she believes would offer her, even briefly, some physical gratification and illusion of comfort and security. And her continuous hardship in life makes her unrepentantly scheming and ruthless in guarding what she regards as her entitlements. It is in these circumstances that she manages to force Sujono into marrying her. As can be predicted, the marriage is doomed right from the beginning, rendering Sulis increasingly desperate in her quest for any semblance of happiness.

Sujono is a dreamer, a violent and frustrated one at that. He abuses Sulis continuously, refuses to work to support his family, ostensibly because he does not believe he sired the child Sulis brought into their life. In his views, he only took advantage of Sulis' vulnerability. In everyday speak, he's a nasty piece of work.

Move back a decade or so, not quite on the other side of the world, but a fair distance from East Java—especially in 1930's terms—in Kyoto, a beautiful daughter of a fisherman, Matsumi, dreams of being a princess clothed and surrounded by beautiful things. When her mother sells her, at the age of 10, to an agency which recruits young candidates to be geisha, a culturally exclusive Japanese institution, she may well be on the way to partially achieving her dreams, at least the part of being clothed and surrounded by beautiful things. However fate sends her to East Java and makes her path cross with that of Sujono.

Then where does Lestari enter the plot? And who is Tjoa Kim Hoa? To divulge all that would undermine the enjoyment of reading and discovering the world of the story for other readers. This is a novel, not only for those who like to read stories embedded in history, but also for those who simply love a good read.

● DEWI ANGGRAENI

If young people are no longer attracted to history books, then let them at least learn... the past through historical fiction.