

**Henk Maier. *We Are Playing Relatives: A Survey of Malay Writing*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004. 539 pages.**

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This important study, by one of the world's leading authorities on literature written in the Malay language, raises fundamental questions that help locate Southeast Asia in a wider world and contribute to a better understanding of how to read Malay literary texts as "world literature." Maier's book is not so much a "survey" as a series of engaging and informative musings on Malay "writing." Maier avoids using the word "literature" in his title for good reason: it imposes on literary writing an essentialized meaning that he is determined to dispel.

Maier begins: "In a world propelled by disintegration and renewal, Malay writing may offer some of us the ultimate salvation from our anxieties." Who is being addressed here? Why can only "some of us" achieve "salvation" from anxiety by reading Malay texts? At times Maier addresses a generic Western reader; at other times, an audience of Indonesian writers and critics. Sometimes the addressee is none other than Leiden University emeritus Professor of Indonesian Literature, A. Teeuw, Maier's own mentor and author of an eminently useful survey history of modern Indonesian literature, a book that was instrumental in establishing a "canon" of literary texts that, until recently, held sway in Indonesia itself. In many ways, *We Are Playing Relatives* is a critique of Teeuw's *Modern Indonesian Literature* and its influence on the study of Malay writing around the world.

The contemporary, globalized world, in any case, is "propelled by disintegration and renewal," which is how Maier, inspired by historian O. W. Wolters's writings about the fluidity and impermanence of civilizations in early Southeast Asia, characterizes the production of Malay literature over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> Maier posits, therefore, an inherent existential connection between the readers of his book and the works he discusses. Living at the beginning of the twenty-first century in constant motion, in a rapidly changing global world without boundaries, contemporary readers of texts and histories from and about the Malay world, wherever those readers are, ought to share an intuitive grasp of the "evasive, fluid, and inconclusive" literary creations about which Maier writes. The ability to "read" a Malay literary text effectively, whether it is the seventeenth-century *Hikayat Hang Tuah* or a novel by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, depends on adopting a strategy, not of critical "othering," but of identification, of "playing relatives" with foreign writers, of feeling at home in their alien textual worlds where flux and hybridity, then as now, reign supreme. The scene from the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* in which the Indrapurans and the Malaccans come to recognize their consanguinity as relatives in a single, hybrid cultural family of transregional Malays serves as an allegory for Maier's reading strategy, but also as a guide for how the readers of Maier's book should position themselves to appreciate Malay writing. Maier's book is a powerful assault on the alienation that separates

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<sup>1</sup> See O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Ithaca, NY, and Singapore: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, in cooperation with The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999) and *Early Southeast Asia: Selected Essays—O. W. Wolters*, ed. Craig J. Reynolds (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, forthcoming).

members of different cultures from one another and inhibits readers from fully engaging with literary texts. We, whoever “we” are, are, in fact, global relatives of one another.

Maier’s transcultural reading strategy is playful, leisurely, even self-indulgent in a benign sense: he treats his readers as members of his own intellectual family, who are expected to accept him on his own terms. The reader of Maier’s book needs to sit back, relax, and listen to his gracefully written narratives and anecdotes about history, writers, and texts; to his alluring musings on textual meaning; and to his exclamations of pleasure and admiration. Although Maier follows the literary theorist Bakhtin in only selecting examples of Malay writing that contain multiple social voices in dialog with one another for critical attention and praise, only his voice of literary commentary can be heard throughout the book. Although the Malay literature he’s studying is richly varied, one calling for a critical approach that is equally *kacukan* (referring to “crossbreed” or “mixed-blood,” to use Maier’s own keyword) and multivocal, Maier allows no other voice to interject during his long, critical monologues. There is no analysis of Malay literary style or discussion of problems of translation of Malay into other languages, matters that are crucial for newcomers to Malay writing to understand—and ones that have bearing on the question of how Malay writing should be read as “world literature.”<sup>2</sup> Oom Henk is perhaps a tiny bit solipsistic, possibly a little too at home in the Malay world to be entirely communicative to those who may have never been there.

Maier’s ruminations lead us, nonetheless, on a fascinating literary and historical journey: to Malacca in the seventeenth-century; to Batavia at the end of the nineteenth; to Central Java and the Netherlands in the early twentieth; back again to Batavia just before World War II; across the Strait of Malacca to the Malay peninsula in the twentieth century; then back to Indonesia, but this time to Sumatra; and, finally, to the contemporary “world of human beings” where Malay is also spoken and written in ways that confound the boundaries between Indonesia and Malaysia, early and modern times, Southeast Asia and the world. Confronted with such *kacukan*, such diversity of time, place, and literary expression, Maier’s monological critical guidance is steady and reassuring. After all, as Maier demonstrates, the history of writing in Indonesia and Malaysia chronicles the struggle between the inherent *kacukan* tendencies of the region’s people, culture, and literary texts against powerful forces of canonization and control. Since the days of Max Havelaar, at least in Indonesia, the struggle for emancipation from such forces has given rise to strong and uncompromising leaders who have opposed the forces of purification arrayed against *kacukan*. Although Maier might demur from accepting such a designation, he belongs, in the field of literary scholarship, to a genealogy of strong, single-minded, oppositional leaders that includes Multatuli, H. B. Jassin, Shahnnon Ahmad, and Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

Maier succeeds in overturning canons, crossing boundaries, and bringing *kacukan* to the fore. But if literature is everywhere *kacukan* and full of *jouissance* (exuberant

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Maier’s wonderful essay on translating “tense” from Malay into English, “In Search of Memories—How Malay Tales Try to Shape History,” in *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present*, ed. Mary Zurbuchen (Singapore and Seattle, WA: Singapore University Press and University of Washington Press, 2005), pp. 99–120.

pleasure), why do we prefer to read some literary works and not others? Why hasn't more Indonesian and Malaysian literature been translated into English? Why are more poems and short stories being produced in Indonesia expressions of what Maier thinks are monological tendencies, rather than lengthy "dialogic" novels? And, finally, what about "difference," easy to decry in the name of fraternity, harder to eradicate in the name of multiculturalism? In early August 2007 I was in Kuala Lumpur and had the pleasure of watching the latest Malaysian romantic comedy, *Kayangan*, starring Indonesian heartthrob Teuku Zacky Azwar and Malaysian beauty Nur Fazura Sharifuddin. A young, workaholic Kuala Lumpur Malay, CEO of his father's multinational firm, meets a smart village girl with a heart of gold and a social conscience. The result: he funds a recreation center to keep local boys off the streets and out of trouble, she embraces capitalism, and they get married. In other words, another happy ending to the latest chapter in the ongoing imagined romance of how Malays are reinventing themselves to remain truly "Malay," dominate the politics and economy of their country, and compete successfully in the global arena. It's a stylish, delightful film. The relevance of its central message for audiences in contemporary Indonesia? None whatsoever, as far as I can see, and much the same could be said of the key themes in the writings of Shahnun Ahmad and A. Samad Said, Malaysia's most famous authors, both of whom are interestingly examined at length in Maier's book, and both contributors to the same project of identity formation in modern Malaysia. Indonesian writers have participated in a very different nation-building effort, but one that, as in the Malaysian case, has also prevented writers from becoming truly cosmopolitan authors whose works will be translated and read around the world. Maier is absolutely right: playing at "being relatives" is the best way continually to renew our efforts at engaging with the long and complicated process of intercultural understanding and cross-cultural literary appreciation in the global age, as long as differences as well as similarities are brought into play.