

Carmen Brouwer & Iris Kole

'Storytelling is the art of making people wonder what will happen next'

Five questions for Eka Kurniawan

Photographer: Mirna Yulistianti



Eka Kurniawan (1975) is an Indonesian writer, screenwriter and graphic designer. He has written, among other things, several novels such as Cantik Itu Luka [Beauty is a Wound] (2002) and Lelaki Harimau [Man Tiger] (2004) and several short stories. The English translation of Man Tiger was nominated for the Man Booker International Prize in 2016. In conversation with editors Carmen Brouwer and Iris Kole, Kurniawan answered five burning questions about, for example, his background in philosophy and graphic design, and his method of storytelling.

Eka Kurniawan (1974) is een Indonesische schrijver, scenarist en grafisch ontwerper. Hij schreef onder meer de romans Cantik Itu Luka [Schoonheid is een vloek] (2002) en Lelaki Harimau [Tijgerman] (2004) en uiteenlopende korte verhalen. De Engelse vertaling van Lelaki Harimau, Man Tiger (2016), werd in 2016 genomineerd voor de Man Booker International Prize. In gesprek met redacteurs Carmen Brouwer en Iris Kole beantwoordde Kurniawan enkele prangende vragen, onder meer over zijn achtergrond als filosoof en grafisch ontwerper, en over zijn werkwijze als schrijver.

You studied Philosophy in Yogyakarta. There, you wrote your thesis on Pramoedya Ananta Toer. What drew you to this author in both your academic and literary work?

Before I attended university, I had never read Pramoedya's works or even knew his name because his books were banned at that time. One day, a friend lent me a photocopy of Pramoedya's book *Bumi Manusia* [*This Earth of Mankind*] (1980). That sparked my interest, and I began reading all of his books I could find. When I started to write my thesis, I felt that everything I needed was already in front of me. Pramoedya also inspired me to write fiction about Indonesia, even though my perspective on Indonesia is likely different from his. Many other writers have also been very influential in my journey, including local authors like Abdullah Harahap and Asmaraman S. Kho Ping Hoo, as well as numerous international writers.

Apart from studying Philosophy, you also considered a career in graphic design. How do these two practices influence your writing?

Studying Philosophy has definitely influenced my writing, even though I don't consciously think about how. I've become accustomed to reading fiction analytically, searching for the underlying ideas in the story. Conversely, I read philosophical texts like novels, following the philosopher's thought process as if it were a storyline. This dual approach to reading has likely shaped the way I write.

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The same goes for graphic design. The activities are very different from each other, but they do influence each other. While writing, I often make sketches in a journal or on paper, which helps visually stimulate the story I'm crafting. Similarly, when I create a design, I think about the story behind it.

How do you approach new topics you're interested in? In other words: what does your artistic research look like?

My writing projects aren't typically based on specific topics. I gather various interesting events or people, often recording these small occurrences. I experience them, see them, hear about them, or read about them in the news or books. These events trigger interpretations in my mind, which then connect these unrelated events into a story. The topic usually emerges last, as my interpretation of these events. This also means I don't have a specific source of inspiration. I live my life as usual, going places for practical reasons like work or vacation. Writing is a long-term endeavour for me, an open project that evolves over time.

In the Netherlands we know your work through translation, but unfortunately, when it comes to translations into English or Dutch, there is quite a quantitative disparity between Indonesian literature and other world literatures. Is it important to you that your work, and by that for example your social criticism, gets through to an international audience?

Initially, I write about characters and issues that are distinctly Indonesian. However, like most novels, my work can reach readers outside its original language through translation. At that point, my novels function differently. Non-Indonesian readers might see themselves and their problems reflected in stories about distant people and places, which would not have been possible if the novels were not translated. Besides, it's very important for a work to be read widely in various languages, although each group of readers will interpret a novel differently. For example, some people label my work as magic realism, even when that's not my specific intention. Integrating magical elements into stories is a longstanding tradition in Indonesian literature, and I am simply continuing this common practice.

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We read that, among other influences, the old legends you heard from a neighbour influenced your experience of narrating and telling stories. Is there a lesson, rule or guideline about telling a good story that you think more people need to know?

The most valuable lesson of storytelling is that any story is useless if it can't hold the audience's attention until the end. Storytelling is about maintaining someone's curiosity, event by event. It's the art of making people wonder what will happen next.