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Dewi Anggraeni’s ‘Neighbourhood Tales’ opens doors.
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GEELONG, Victoria (JP): During the sometimes troubled history of relations between Indonesia and Australia, it has been suggested that the two countries are simply too far apart to ever really understand each other. From this mutual lack of understanding, it is said, arises the potential for disagreement and even conflict.

But Dewi Anggraeni’s new book Neighbourhood Tales gives lie to this notion, easily and often gracefully traversing between the two worlds, or world views.

The author is not writing about political issues, or even culture in a direct sense. Rather she has constructed a series of short stories that bring the people of one culture into the world of another, very often in what might be term “blended” circumstances.

The stories of Neighbourhood Tales were written in either English or Indonesian, and then translated into the other language, to provide a complete set of each. One would require more sensitive cultural radar than mine to detect which was written in what language first, reflecting the familiarity with which the author travels between her worlds.

One might assume, as a bicultural exercise, that Dewi Anggraeni is focused on the cultural context. She is, however, first and foremost a story teller, a writer whose appreciation of life’s nuances touches on deeper meanings we all share.

Although there are culturally specific references, the implied sharing of a common humanity transcends those cultural difference. Where such difference is highlighted, if is often done so for comic effect, for example in the story ‘Halal’.

In one sense, such “blending” reflects Dewi Anggraeni’s own experience, being born and raised in West Java but having lived with an Australian partner in Australia for 30 years. The author has said that she feels a part of both cultures, and it shows in her understanding. However, while both cultures sit side by side, the author is careful not to compare them. Rather, like herself, she shows how they can and often do harmoniously co-exist.

The author clearly likes Australia, or those parts of it that Australians might like, and she is comfortable with its subtleties. Her fictional visit to Melbourne’s bushy outer suburb of Eltham, for example, immediately invoked my own distant memories of that place, so true was her touch. The author similarly continues to inhabit and portray an Indonesian world, in both a literal and figurative sense.

More than the physical surroundings, there are continuous references to the types of feelings and ideas that contribute to the world view of many Indonesians.

Perhaps in part because of the convincing story telling style this does not seem, to an Australian, as unfamiliar as it potentially might.

In particular, throughout Neighbourhood Tales there is a strong emphasis on a traditional Indonesian engagement with the spiritual. At one level this echoes the more distant past of much of Australian society, of which there is a social memory.

At another level it reflects how this element of the informal unknown has become standardized in the West at the generic “ghost story’. Unlike the two-dimensional "ghost story", though, like her more temporal characters this spiritual element is infused with life.

Life is also pronounced in the opening story Music for Libretto/Komposisi buat Libreto. The protagonist is an Indonesian composer visiting Australia seeking escape from a troubled marriage and toward musical inspiration. Although the sexual urgency of this story is not repeated, it does reflect a remarkably common (and cross cultural) theme. So too does Eleven Year Slip/Tergelincir Dalam Cobaan where an infidelity tests a marriage, and in the gentler cross-cultural longings of The Heirloom/Keris Pusaka.

While the book opens doors for Australians (and other Westerners) to Indonesia, also for an Indonesian audience Neighbourhood Tales opens doors to Australian life, through both Australian and Indonesian characters, and shows that while respective lives are different they are perhaps less different than is sometimes claimed.
Dewi Anggraeni's *Neighbourhood Tales* works well as simple storytelling, and in providing glimpses of deeper truths. And it does that in a way that should not only be satisfying to audiences from both Australia and Indonesia, but also as a signifier for how so much suspicion between the peoples of the two countries has been and remains unnecessary.

- Damien Kingsbury

The reviewer, Damien Kingsbury, is a professor at Deakins University.

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