

Review of *The People Next Door: Understanding Indonesia* By Duncan Graham, Nedlands: UWA Press, 2004, 190 pages, paperback, \$38.95. Reviewed by Richard Gehrman in the *Australian Public Intellectual Network Review of Books* issue 26 **September 2004**.

Duncan Graham, *The People Next Door: Understanding Indonesia*, Crawley, University of Western Australia Press, 2004, reviewed by Richard Gehrman, University of Southern Queensland

*“The Indonesian way is not ours. But it deserves respect, is worth the study, and calls for understanding. “*

In the wake of the bomb attack on the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, a varied collection of thoughts come to mind. A decade ago I reviewed Ratih Hardjono's *White Tribe of Asia: An Indonesian View of Australia*. This was at a time of Gareth Evans and Paul Keating inspired euphoria for Australia's (apparently) new found relationship with Asia. The Ingleson Review on Asia in Australian Education and the Garnaut Report on regional economies had informed Australians that Asia actually did exist and required observation and understanding, and when Japanese tourists and investors descended upon parts of Australia such as Queensland's Gold Coast. Australia was indubitably part of Asia, with President Suharto of Indonesia as Australia's new best friend in the region, most notably after the sartorial elegance of an unforgettable batik-clad 1994 APEC Summit in Bogor. This was a great time to be teaching Asian history and politics at an Australian University, with both funding and enrolments growing apace. Since then we have seen the rise and fall of One Nation, the cataclysmic effects of the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis, the removal of Suharto by *reformasi* inspired demonstrators, the bloody independence of East Timor, people smuggling and the *Tampa*. When considering these events, and the terrorist actions leading to September 11, the Bali Bombing, and the Jakarta Embassy bombing, the atmosphere seems so very different. It is challenging to have to accept that in a short

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ten-year period so much has apparently changed. Yet while our engagement with Asia is not viewed in the same light that it once was, Asia is still of immense importance to Australia, and of all the states that make up the (possibly non-existent but often debated) construct that is Asia, Indonesia is, for a variety of reasons, extremely important. This being the case, there is a large potential audience who will read Graham's book, and because of the diminution of enthusiasm for "Asia" at a government level, the arrival of this book is particularly appropriate.

*The People Next Door* consists of former award-winning journalist Duncan Graham's personal experiences of, and observations in Indonesia. These are a study of the evolving relationship between two very close and two very different neighbours. Graham's easygoing, even chatty style makes the book most accessible to both academic and non-academic audiences, and should guarantee a wide and satisfied readership. Moving from analysis of Javanese spirit worship and religion to the Indonesian predilection for zany uniforms, this is an entertaining read. Graham's fondness for, and familiarity with the East Javanese city of Surabaya is clearly apparent and his warm descriptions of a region he is deeply attached to is especially effective.

Academic interpretations of Indonesian society and culture have at times been inhibited by the need to write for a highly critical and at times partisan audience both in Indonesia and Australia. Under the New Order (1965-98), fear of being refused permission to undertake further research acted as a constraint on free speech by overly critical outsiders while within Australia, pro and anti New Order schools of thought enlivened many academic debates. (I recall a 1989 ANU conference assessing the 25

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years of the New Order being the forum for several tense exchanges). As with many depictions originating in journalism, there is a freedom in being outside the academy that allows Graham to fill the pages of *The People Next Door* with critical and accessible vignettes on contentious and often hidden issues such as Indonesian racism, drug use, gays, persecution of Christians, abuse of women and the condition of the poor. In 'Praise be to Allah', readers are taken into a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) located in Bali bomber Amrozi's hometown, and given an introduction to both the negatives and positives of the rural Javanese world that shaped the condemned terrorists. It is fitting that Graham ends this excursion to a very un-Indonesian fanaticism on a positive note, and that he makes the point that when reflecting on the culture of the *pesantren*, there are similarities to the world of the Christian fundamentalist.

Graham's text includes a series of detailed and thoughtful interviews with a variety of opinion makers. These include Arswendo Armowiloto, the former magazine editor of *Monitor* jailed for three years for blasphemy after his magazine published a popularity poll that placed the Prophet Mohammed below the President; the well known journalist, former political prisoner and political activist Pramodya Ananta Toer, and Julius Siryaranamual, a human rights worker committed to assisting prostitutes. These interviews serve to identify currents of thought and activity within Indonesia's intellectual world, and make it clear that the 215 million inhabitants of the archipelago do not think as one.

*The People Next Door* contains fascinating insights into how they see us, and these insights highlight the difference between the two cultures. Of note is Indonesian

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confusion regarding an Australian institution we take for granted - the unemployment benefits system; of our casual acceptance of public graffiti; our lack of respect for order and authority; and our puzzlingly empty churches. Some Australians reading this will be sadly surprised to learn that we are not universally viewed in a positive light within Indonesia. For us the 'Howard Doctrine' is less a sponsorship of universal human rights in a repressive region, than an issue of debate constituting part of the domestic political agenda. From an Indonesian perspective, Australia can be seen as an interfering would be puppet-master that tries to shape Indonesian life and society into a pattern of its own choosing.

There are a number of 'how to' sections such as how to speak the language which while useful, seem to sit outside of the style of the rest of the rest of the book. In a similar fashion, there are insights into everyday Indonesian business practice that also do not really jell as well as they might. Yet why should travel guides be the sole authority on these issues? Why do we regard the inclusion of these topics in a book such as this as inappropriate? Perhaps we need to reconsider the nature of books. The useful bibliography allows the more scholarly reader to go further, while the incipient traveller or backpacker will be well satisfied and in the process learn a lot more about the world's 4<sup>th</sup> largest country than they would from the *Lonely Planet*.