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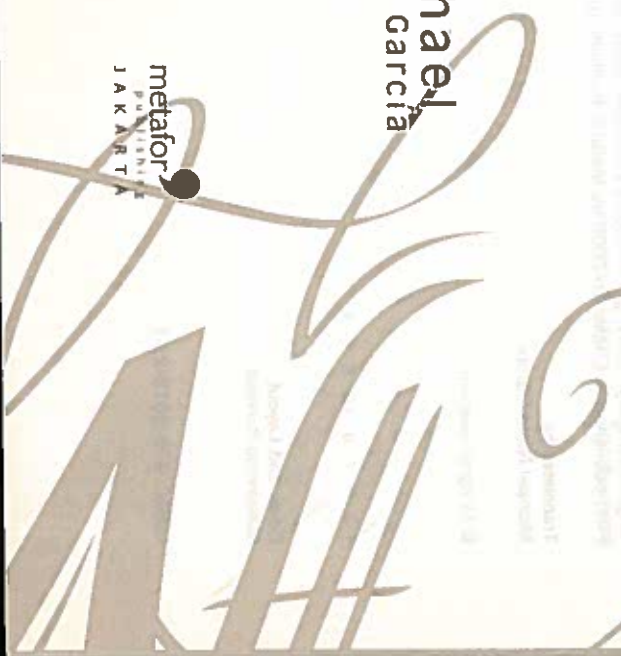
they say I'm a

# Yonkey

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by Djenar Maesa Ayu  
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by Penerbit Gramedia Pustaka Utama

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Translated by  
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for

Sutardji Calzoum Bachri  
Budi Darma  
and  
Seno Gumira Ajidarma

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## introduction

IN 1998 INDONESIA UNDERWENT DRAMATIC CHANGES, with President Soeharto stepping down after three decades of authoritarian rule. The economic conditions that precipitated the shift to a more democratic form of rule are often cited but the full of measure of the democratization of print culture that accompanied economic and political change has yet to be taken. Changes in journalistic coverage and in book publishing were among the most profound. The Ministry of Information—the primary vehicle of centralized, formal censorship—was dismantled soon after the regime of the former military general ended, and by the time it was revived Indonesian society and publishing had accustomed itself to the attitudes and consciousness of the new era of "reformation."

As with previous moments of great historical change in the nation, political upheaval was mirrored by the emergence or reorientation of literary *angkatan*, a "generation" or "movement." Though the sheer number of new writers precludes the kind of cohesion and personal affiliation that the label "angkatan" suggests, it is the most apt rubric for the recent dramatic shift in literature given the past use of the term in Indonesian literary history.

There was a Generation 45, demarcated by the year Indonesian independence was declared. Generation 66 writers took center stage with their new literary journal, *Horison*, in tandem with the rise of

Soeharto's New Order government and that regime's persecution and imprisonment of writers associated with the political and cultural left. And beginning most distinctly in 1998, a new literary sentiment accompanied democratization of the press and governance. More people started writing, more books were published, and a wider range of topics were written about. Generation 98 was born.

Djenar Maesa Ayu's fiction is both exceptional and representative of Generation 98 writers, particularly the great wave of women writers—some of whose work critics refer to somewhat dismissively as Sastra Wangi, or fragrant literature—who have emerged to great popular and critical acclaim. Before 1998 there were few well-known women authors. Now they often dominate book sales, with sex as their most common theme.

That is, sex in the wider sense of the word, from gender relations to love interests, and even as a metaphor for individual freedom. The more literary books avoid classification as erotica or popular romances by keeping actual sex offstage, but even fiction that is mostly figurative may be titillating to some and remain religiously and culturally provocative in a predominantly Muslim nation recovering from decades of media repression and the control of literary culture.

Sex in this wider sense saturates the pages of Djenar's fiction, where it is used to excoriate hypocrisy, parental neglect, childhood abuse, and the seedier side of modern urban lifestyles in conflict with more traditional values. Taboo subjects such as promiscuity, incest, and female sexuality are foregrounded, while prostitution, homosexuality, and sexual exploitation make appearances as everyday facts of life. Such trenchant

social critique is a hallmark of some of the best contemporary Indonesian fiction. So when fundamentalist factions began pushing for anti-pornography legislation that would suppress freedom of speech in the name of protecting people from exposure to sex in print, Djenar publicly spoke out against the proposed bill.

The daughter of celebrated film director Syuman Djaya and well-known actress Tutie Kirana, Djenar is an interesting personality in her own right. She is a smoker and self-proclaimed beer lover in a society where women smokers are a minority and drinking is largely disdained. Her fiction appears in newspapers and literary journals, while she herself can be found on television, in celebrity tabloids, and even in men's magazines.

The stories in *They Say I'm a Monkey* (Meraka Bilang, *Saya Monyet*) are well known to readers of contemporary Indonesian fiction. They have appeared in *Horison*, *Kompas*, *Republika*, and *Jurnal Cerpen Indonesia*. One of them, "Nayla's Time," was selected as title story for *Kompas* newspaper's annual collection of best short stories published in the Sunday edition over a one year period. When the *Kompas* collection appeared as *Waktu Nayla: Selected Short Stories Kompas 2003*, Djenar Maesa Ayu became the first woman to be recognized with the prestigious honor.

That same year *They Say I'm a Monkey* was a top ten finalist for the Khatulistiwa Literary Award, one of the most coveted prizes for contemporary literature in the nation. In 2004 her second collection of short stories, *Jangan Main-Main (dengan Kelaminmu)* (Don't Play with Your Sex), was among the final five. Her first novel, *Nayla*, was published



In May 2005, and received with the same mix of controversy and acclaim met by her previous books.

Djenar studied the craft of writing under three important Indonesian authors, each a winner of the ASEAN (Association of South East Nations) Prize for Literature: Budi Darma, Seno Gumira Ajidarma, and Sutardji Calzoum Bachri, respectively an academic critic and creative writer, a short story virtuoso and occasional journalist, and a poet. The result is that Djenar's fiction combines the rhythms, lyricism, images, and playful language of poetry with the earnestness and impact of prose reportage. In a prominent magazine interview, Djenar once claimed to never use a plot. In actuality, her stories are strongly plotted and typically end with a twist. But they are also short and impressionistic, sometimes leaving the reader with a lingering emotional impact more akin to that achieved by plotless poetry than by prose.

The metaphors—dogs and monkeys, tropical fruit, painting a window, the human heartbeat—in her stories often function by the same storytelling logic. Less realistic images linger longer. The reader who takes the metaphor of the leech for a direct reference to male anatomy misses the figurative logic of the narrative and may be confused about what multiplying into a bunch of little snakes "means." Regardless of any particular interpretation, the image of the leech will have been burned into the mind's eye. So when questions about the hidden meaning of a story plague the reader, it might serve well to remember Djenar's claim: that she never uses a plot.

Deeply embedded in Jakarta culture, the stories plumb human reality with an authenticity that gives them universal appeal. Like the city

experienced by so many Jakartans, some of the stories are both tragic and surreal, with a subdued, sometimes twisted, sense of humor radiating through them. But though influenced by surrealist and magical realist authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and Seno Gumira Ajidarma, psychological characterization in Djenar's fiction is profoundly realistic. The characters may not always behave as the person next door would, but the depiction of deep-rooted and primal human needs is true to life.

This makes Djenar's characters emotional creatures. With difficulty they try to reconcile their animal natures to the rational and social aspects of their being. Hypocrisy is a common vice when a traditional society is swept into modernity, where rapidly changing values can create a larger than usual gap between public ideals and private behavior. In *They Say I'm a Monkey* the reader recognizes hypocrisy of her own when the description of it is expanded to include the denial of natural human desires, which can be suppressed but never fully eliminated.

Women are the central characters; their stories often told from a child's-eye view. But other than the cameo appearance of Bi Inah in a second story, characters from one tale do not appear in another. What links these stories instead is a less tangible hero, imagination.

Imagination—a product of individual minds that cannot be fully contained by language, social reality, or the emotional core of the brain—opens the doors of possibility for one after another of the trapped characters. A source of new values for a changing society, it is also the means by which those who are oppressed or neglected under an existing social or family arrangement can imagine a better world for themselves.

That Djenar's celebration of imagination offers the same hope for many Indonesian readers no doubt accounts for some of the popularity of her fiction. That fiction celebrates imagination ensures that it will long be with us.

### A Note on the Translation

POETRY, it has been said, cannot be translated, it can only be rewritten. But it has also been said that every act of communication, even between two speakers of the same language, is an act of translation. Translating a collection of literary stories—more so than the translation of other types of writing for other purposes—demands pulling the reader gently toward the foreignness of the source language and culture. But though some of the cultural sense of the text can be preserved, the multiple levels of meaning, connotation, and phatic or emotional impact cannot. The poetic elements of the text such as internal rhyme, wordplay, and the rhythm achieved at the level of syllables and sentences can only be approximated with a substitute or equivalent effect in the language they are being translated into.

Deciding what to leave as close to the original syntax, word choice, and idiomatic expression as possible can range from the most faithful translation to the most treacherously literal. In translating *They Say I'm a Monkey* from Indonesian I have been guided by the principle of readability. To avoid defeating the purpose of translation, I have aimed

to keep the book enjoyably readable to those with no initial familiarity with the language and culture in which the stories were written. Cultural references have been retained, but punctuation has been naturalized to that of standard written English. I have changed paragraphing only rarely, and modified sentences only when readability or preserving literary effects seemed more important than retaining their original parsing.

One of the signature traits of Djenar Maesa Ayu's fiction is its staccato rhythm, which has been preserved in various ways. Typically, staccato effect is accomplished in the source text at the sentence level, particularly through the repetition of words. But some of this repetition depends on the use of proper nouns, which unless alternated or replaced with personal pronouns can be rather ungainly, even alienating, in English, whereas in Indonesian it is common for a person to repeatedly refer to herself in the third person as "Mother" or by her given name. Alternately, an instance of anaphora—in which successive sentences begin with the same word or string of words—might not be duplicable in English, such as when the first word, the word that is repeated in the other sentences, is "day" and the second word is "vacation." In this example, the reversed syntax of English makes preserving the anaphora impossible. In other instances, duplicating the anaphora and sentence length might unintentionally produce a jarring effect on the reader. Or the sentence might grow to an unwieldy length when a pithy sentence can only be translated into many more words than the original, losing its staccato feel. In cases such as these I have sometimes changed the sentence length and created an equivalent rhythmic effect through the use of

conventional English punctuation, particularly em-dashes, colons and, most of all, commas.

Indonesian or Javanese terms that have been retained in the translation are italicized except in the case of forms of address or where the word's meaning is apparent from the context. A glossary at the back of this book offers brief definitions or explanations of these terms as needed. Translator's endnotes have been kept to a minimum and appear under the heading of "Notes," also at the back of the book.

Over the course of translating this book, I have benefited in various ways from the contributions of many people. It is with pleasure that I thank some of them here. Mimi Yiu offered shrewd judgment in response to numerous editing and copyediting queries, while many more people offered suggestions on everything from nuances in the translated text to improving the odds of getting a clear connection when calling Jakarta from New York. Among those who have contributed in a variety of ways are, in no particular order, Paul A. Olson, Eric Tagliacozzo, James T. Siegel, Ben Abel, Lorraine Paterson, John McClynn, Rene Lysloff, Peter Gilgen, Dan McCall, Fredric Bogel, Helena Maria Viramontes, Stephen Chong, David Newhouse, Jack Molyneaux, Mercedes Chavez, Kiran Gajwani, Lenni Kimawati, Uli Kozok, Ignatius Krishna Dharmma, and many others too numerous to name. For frequent fact-checking over the months and for

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Very little contemporary Indonesian fiction is translated into any language, and for his commitment to seeing this translation into publication and for his seemingly boundless enthusiasm, Richard Oh deserves special mention. I am grateful for his confidence in me and for inspiration of others involved with the publication of this translation.

John Wolff, whose dictionary has been the nearest book on my shelf throughout the translating of this collection, vetted the manuscript and forced me to refine my translation theory and praxis by offering keen insights in reference to specific translation choices in the text. I count myself among the incalculable number of those whose formal study of Indonesian began with Wolff's famous blue-cover Indonesian language textbook.

Lastly, Joel Porte played an indirect but invaluable role in the completion of this translation. In both his formal and informal capacity as mentor, Joel—teacher, lover of language, and incomparable Renaissance man—inspired by example, encouraging my interests while sharing his own and always allowing me the intellectual freedom to pursue those interests, even to the other side of the earth.

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Ithaca, NY

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