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Finding a Voice through the Genres

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Panel: The Shape of Your Paragraph: Genre and Its Constraints

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Finding a Voice through the Genres

In the mid '80s, I started to write literature. Since I didn't have a teacher, my point of reference was the work of the writers I considered good at the time. I copied their styles and ideas when I wrote either fiction or poetry. So, one week, I might write a Kafkaesque short story, and the week after that produce millions of poetry pamphlets, then try to be a sarcastic—yet entertaining—social commentator in my essays. Every single piece was brilliant, or so I thought. Anytime I reread that writing now, I feel the urge to take off my shoes and use them to catch my tears of shame.

Even though back in those days I felt that I had already achieved something—some of my stories and poems were published in renowned magazines and newspapers in Indonesia—I began to acknowledge one cold fact: I did not have my own voice as a writer. Finding my voice was a struggle for years. I gave up writing poems because I felt my pieces were more and more artificial. But, for fiction, I was stubborn enough.

After studying geodetic engineering for six miserable years and never making a cent from it, I started working as a journalist at *Tempo*, Indonesia's largest news magazine, and this became a turning point in my writing. I covered politics, culture, sports, science, business, and everything else. But I did not do straight news reporting. *Tempo*'s narrative style demands that their journalists tell stories based on fact. As it turned out, I really enjoyed writing nonfiction. Sometimes a story presented itself that was stranger than fiction, but more often, I had to dig deeper. However, finding material for my pieces trained me to use all five senses when reporting, to search for the most suitable people to use as sources, and to conduct adequate research.

Since then, I apply the same pattern when I write fiction. Looking for good material is a must. My short story "Edelweiss Pays her Condolences in Ciputat" begins with the premise that what if someone you hate comes to a tragic end—how would you respond? I had to get solid material, so the premise worked out, and not as a story about people who cheer on the plight of others.

The limited space afforded to magazine articles trained me to write as efficiently as possible, with no wasted words. This is very useful primarily for writing short stories, because the space in newspapers or magazines is also limited: 2,700 words maximum. Meanwhile, writing lengthy features gave me an understanding of how to maintain stamina and play with tempo, two things that became very handy when I wrote my novel.

In the late '90s, I also started translating novels and nonfiction from English and French into Indonesian. My first published translation was *Einstein's Dreams*, a novel by Alan Lightman, and I am proud of how well the novel was received. I love translating because it teaches me to choose words and idioms carefully. When translating, I often imagine how the author speaks in Indonesian. It is not because I am afraid something will be lost in translation, but because I want to do justice to the original.

It is common for Indonesians to venture into many genres of writing. Most of the founders of *Tempo* magazine are fiction writers and poets. Not all of them excel in every genre, though some do. But I strongly believe that writing in many genres will make you better equipped.

Saying that it is an unnecessary burden for serious writers to specialize in a single super-genre is an

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understatement. Writers already have enough pressure and guilt, because any time we publish our words in the form of a book, we know that thousands of trees have to be cut down. So it is only fair that we are judged or labeled by the quality of our works, not by our genre of choice.

So, if we call actors versatile, musicians inventive, and artists explorative when they venture into many genres, why do we need to give a discouraging label to writers? Do we not suffer enough?