

SEPTEMBER 17, 2005

# GOODWEEKEND

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD MAGAZINE

two of us Max Lane & Joesoef Isak

Interviews by Nikki Barrowclough



**Max Lane**, 53, is an academic and former Australian diplomat who translated the first volume of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's epic work, *Buru Quartet* – a semi-fictional history of Indonesia that has been banned by its government. **Joesoef Isak**, 75, imprisoned during the Soeharto era, published *Buru Quartet* and remains Pramoedya's editor.

**Joesoef:** One day at my home in Jakarta in 1981, this man appears, a *bule* – it's slang for white man. He came uninvited and asked if I was interested to have *This Earth of Mankind* [the first volume of *Buru Quartet*] translated into English. But he was speaking English. I switched to Indonesian, and he started talking Indonesian. Amazing! He speaks better than the average Indonesian. I tell you frankly, he also

understands Javanese. I don't understand Javanese.

When I asked him what he was doing in Jakarta, he said he was a diplomat. We were aware that the Australian embassy had a role to be friendly with Soeharto and there was this diplomat saying he was going to translate Pramoedya. I found Max quite surprising because in the eyes of the military, Pramoedya and I were dangerous people. Then I found he had progressive ideas that were different from his government. When I was still in prison he was teaching politics at a famous drama school in central Java. He knows many progressive students and dissidents.

Max is really a leftist – not just fighting for human rights, but *really* a leftist. He's really, maybe, I don't know, a communist. I am not a communist. He's well known in Indonesia among activists. When he told his ambassador he translated the novel, he was mad! Max was given a month to leave Indonesia. He was very sad when he was sent back to Australia. But he never regrets leaving the diplomatic world. I am always making jokes. I say, 'Max, don't you realise that living as a bourgeois, as a capitalist, is actually very convenient? Why don't we stop with this politics, because it's nothing but misery?' Max is sometimes more Indonesian than the Indonesians. He loves Indonesia. He loves Indonesian food, he knows all about our country, our culture. I think he would like to be an Indonesian citizen as well as Australian. [But] you have a higher living standard in Australia. I would like this!

You know, we are jumping into politics, fighting, going to prison – not to be poor. I think for Max it's not important – but for me, it is important. Living in Jakarta without a car – the crowded buses – you cannot imagine.

Since he jumped into politics it has always been Max with empty pockets. When he comes to Indonesia he lives very modestly. This is his choice. He says he lives always without debt. He's happy.

When I first met him he was married to an Indonesian woman and had a daughter. I don't know when he divorced but he married again last year. I was the only one, with my wife, present at the wedding in central Java. His wife's family is a very conservative Muslim family but his wife was a dynamic political activist against the [Soeharto] government.

He took me for a drive around Sydney – he has an old car – and showed me all the places. Very beautiful. And the big houses on the harbour where the rich people live. I say – always we are joking – I say, 'Max, if we were in power, do you stay in one of those houses?' He says no, no, he would break them down and make gardens for ordinary people.

**Max:** Joesoef was brought up in a totally Dutch environment. His parents spoke nothing but Dutch at home. His father worked for a British telegraph com-

bought a typesetting machine and installed it in a dark, narrow, dingy, disused bathroom at the back of the house. That bathroom, now with an air-conditioner and some new tiles, remains the centre of Joesoef's publishing company. Scores and scores of books have come out of that little bathroom.

Joesoef, Pramoedya. and Hasyim Rachman [the third publishing partner, who was imprisoned on Buru Island with Pramoedya] were the only ones out of [thousands] of political prisoners released in the late 1970s to keep confronting the dictatorship openly. They were banned from working in traditional journalism and had to report to the military authorities weekly. During one period, Joesoef went for days of interrogation. He wasn't hurt physically. He complained of being terrorised by stupidity.

You can talk to Joesoef for hours about any topic. He was secretary-general of the Asia-Africa Journalists' Association and visited Cuba, China, Algeria, Africa. He has many stories about poking around in Africa at the height of the Cold War.

I don't think he has mellowed [politically]. He has a sophisticated analysis of politics, so the positions he takes are very measured. Among the younger generation becoming involved in modernising and democratising Indonesia, he's very well respected.

Neither of us has regular access to the bourgeois comforts we once experienced. We were both infected

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pany and was quite well versed in English, and as a teenager Joesoef read Freud and Shakespeare. He told me when he first heard Soekarno speak he couldn't understand a word because he didn't understand Indonesian. Now he must be one of the most eloquent writers in Indonesian.

When I first met him he was the centre of huge controversy as the publisher of *This Earth of Mankind*, a powerful story about a young man's political and emotional awakening. It was a fantastic read and I thought it should be translated as soon as possible. The publisher's address was inside the book and it turned out to be Joesoef's house. He'd been in prison for 10 years, out a couple of years, and his house had been turned into the centre of a publishing endeavour. There were crates of books everywhere, former political prisoners doing different tasks, and they'd

at some point by luxury. We like to sit in comfortable surroundings and have a few glasses of red wine as a good way to discuss life. Mostly our discussions are in the bathroom at the back of his house.

We've been friends for almost 25 years and the image that sticks in my mind is his house and bathroom. The sofa in the lounge room, three-quarters taken up with piles of books and papers. If he's not there, you walk around to the bathroom, which will be full of cigarette smoke – he has a bad heart and he's not supposed to smoke – and there'll be one full cup of coffee and the dregs of another, computer online, manuscripts everywhere.

You can go there anytime between 2pm and 4am and he'll talk about politics for hours, sitting in his rattan chair. ■