

New Pearls in the Magic Garage

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John Donnelly
Magic Garage

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SO HORRENDOUS ARE the facts of man's inhumanity to modern man that the novelists V.S. Naipaul and Arundhati Roy have claimed to have given up both reading and writing fiction. The more facts emerge about recent events in some countries, the more frivolous it seems for outsiders to write and read novels about them. That may explain why the torrent of Australian fiction about Asia from the 1960s onwards is now little more than a creek. Much of what has recently been published is set in the past. Contemporary novels about Asia are now written mainly by Asian Australians. Our other writers seem to lack the desire — or is it the capacity or confidence? — to penetrate a complex Asian society and emerge with a narrative.

So Indonesian specialist John Donnelly's *Magic Garage*, with a stunning cover by Amelia Mollett, comes as a welcome surprise. Donnelly the insider prefers to avoid the foreigners' Jakarta. Knowing his way around, he takes you off the highways and into the alleys and canals of Setiabudi, a fringe settlement targeted by corrupt developers and the even more corrupt army. You meet the 'little people' of Setiabudi who get in their way; you taste their salads and satays, sample their herbal medicines, smell their drains, see them bleed. All Donnelly's ordinary people are manipulated and deceived by the system, but they are no slouches at manipulating and deceiving each other, whether they deal in Amway, massage, holy water, secrets or sex.

At the bottom of the food chain are the starving Timorese. Once a refugee, many more times a refugee, it seems. An old woman develops stigmata and her hovel becomes a site of pilgrimage. A little further up the chain are the transvestites, who work as waiters, hairdressers and whores. Chenny, saving for her operation in Singapore, is servicing the sleazy developer and the army general, who is an Elvis lookalike. Their wives, children, drivers and goons all jerk each others' chain but are all vulnerable to being jerked around as well. So is the Australian investor, Boule, whose name, to the amusement of the little people, sounds like bule, 'whitey'.

Munin, who operates the Blitar Magic Garage, is a former Soekarno supporter and is on the run as a suspected communist. Not only can he repair cars overnight with spirit magic, but he can and does transform himself into a pig or a tiger to defend the squatter settlement against the developers and the army. These events are recounted so believably that you can accept Munin's trotters, tusks, bristles and stink. Limping, in flight from the army's blackshirts, he jumps into the river:

Gagging as he came up surrounded by paper debris and plastic bottles, Munin heard them give up the chase: 'Back to the filth it came from.' He held his breath, his nostrils barely breaking the surface, grateful for the mud bath which shook off these parasites. Pigs are like people, he thought, clean except when forced to live in filth ... The smell of the pond where the batik factory and others pumped their noxious waste was acrid, overpowering; but the poor of Setiabudi could not help living and working on top of this open sewer. This was what life held for Bung Karno's little people in Pak Harto's Jakarta, he thought grimly: people like himself.

Back in human shape by morning, but still smelling like a pig, Munin now has fingers to get a metal pin out of his foot. His formerly bulging flanks are now pockets, stuffed with the gold and valuables that showered on him when his magic created an explosion in the general's house.

At the end, as the blackshirts make a revenge raid on the kampung, you know who its defender is when a limping tiger appears on top of the wall of the burning garage. The general is taken to hospital with deep scratches on his face and his Elvis-suit in ribbons. Manipulators all, the locals are already planning what they'll do when they catch the tiger:

See, a tiger is just about the most useful bit of flesh around. Eat the flesh and become impervious to snakebite. Or the heart, for strength and cunning. Grind the bones as a powder cure for rheumatism; mix the brain with oil and rub it on acne. Blend the gallstones with honey for abscesses; roll the eyeballs into pills and cure convulsions. And the kontol and two furry bakso — they're the most powerful aphrodisiacs of all! Have you ever seen tigers mating? Twenty times a day dong dong dong! He punctuated his speech with the thrusting hips and shoulders of the jaipongan dance ... Always there was a pearl for somebody in the mud.

Donnelly's early chapters, which have to introduce so many people and their places in the food chain, are hard going, loaded with too many adjectives and italicised flashbacks. But as the plot thickens, the air clears. *Magic Garage* will shine among this year's novels like a beacon.