



INTERVIEW

Interview with Nuril Basri, November 2024.

Ben Murtagh



Nuril Basri, 2024

Indonesian novelist, Nuril Basri, was born in Tangerang, West Java on 14 March 1985. He was raised in a staunchly Islamic family, with his mother working as a farmer and his father as a janitor. His primary and secondary education were completed in Tangerang and he went on to study English Letters at UIN Jakarta. Coming from a lower socio-economic background Nuril has had to take on a number of different jobs and assignments to support his writing. These include working as a secretary at the Korean Embassy in Jakarta, as a waiter on a cruise ship which took him as far as Dover (UK), Copenhagen, and Antarctica, a cashier in a mini-market, a mystery shopper, and a salesman.

Nuril has published a total of nine novels, several of which have been translated into English, French and Malay. His writing is often described as tragicomedy synthesising aspects of autofiction, bildungsroman, and diverse offbeat stories. His protagonists might be characterised as lonely or somewhat eccentric and there is a clear interest in more marginalised figures in society, including queer characters. Drawing on his own experiences overseas, several of his novels also have settings beyond Indonesia.

His published works to date include: *Banci kalap* (2008); *Halo, aku dalam novel* (2009); *Mas suka, masukin aja* (2009), a novelisation of the film with the same title; *My favorite goodbye* an Indonesian language novel (2015), but first published a few months earlier in Malay with the title *Romantis*; *Bukan perjaka* (2017); but published previously in Malay translation with the title *Dosa* (2012) and in English translation as *Not a virgin* (2017); *Enak* (2016) and its English translation as *Love, lies and indomee* (2019); *Sunyi* (2017); *Maya* (2019) with an English translation (2024) of the same title; *Gula, gula, gula* (2022), a sequel to *Bukan perjaka*, also published in Malay (2023) with the title *Gula*; *49 hari: kisah*

penantang gelombang (2023); *Le rat d'égout* (2023), still awaiting publication in Indonesian.

Nuril has received recognition for his work both in Indonesia and internationally. This includes grants from the National Book Committee of Indonesia (2017) which supported a writer's residency in London; the British Council for his stay at the Creative Writing Centre at the University of East Anglia in 2018 as part of the London Book Fair initiatives; the Robert Bosch Foundation with the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin (2018) to conduct research for a novel in Berlin focusing on cross-cultural literary exchange, and Gothenburg City of Literature (2022) where he was granted a writer's residency as part of a UNESCO City of Literature programme. Since 2023 Nuril has been selected as a recipient of the National Talent Management for Literature Programme, funded by the Indonesian Ministry for Education, Culture, Research and Technology which aims to support the development and promotion of talented Indonesian writers. He was awarded the Grand Prix du Roman Gay Traduit in 2023 for *Le rat d'égout*.

Nuril is currently in the United Kingdom where he has completed a writing retreat in Jersey funded by the Moving Arts Collective and ArtHouse Jersey, and is also attending events in Norwich, Bristol, Aberdeen and London. This interview resulted from a discussion in London, evolving into its current written form through a series of emails.



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Can you tell me more about yourself and how you first started as a writer?

It is always a very hard question to answer, at least for me, to tell other people about myself. It's a never-ending job to comprehend your very own self! But it's not fair if I dodge this question by saying I just have my own artistic temperament and people should tolerate it when I say no.

I grew up as a farmer and my biggest inspiration was to work in a shoe factory. I never had a dream about being a writer. This is an alien concept for me, being a writer. I knew that writers exist, but in other kinds of realities, which were not mine. Writers are people who have a desk and a mini library. My house only had an earth floor, and the walls were made of woven bamboo (*anyaman bilik*). We didn't even have electricity. No one in my family reads, let alone write.

I came to this idea of writing when I was working in a *warnet* (internet cafe) as the administrator and found out about blogs. And reading other people's stories gave me a sense of satisfaction, especially ones that resonated with me, not necessarily the entire story, but sometimes just a single sentence; I found that it could be very meaningful. And maybe secretly I have a bit of the voyeur in me, to always want to know about someone's life, and I enjoyed that, so I started to mimic it: to tell people about what's happening in my life at a particular moment.

I strive to tell people about funny things, small encounters while I was working in the *warnet*, like how some angry mums came in looking for their kids who had skipped school, or fascinating transactions happening behind the stalls, etc. I would say that Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the city* series gave me some influence too. The way she took an epiphany from her daily life and magnified that in her newspaper articles, to take something trivial and to make meaning of it, it's also what captivates me in my writing. Apparently, writing doesn't necessarily need to be about grand ideas, but it's just about delivering stories and to take something from them. I think there's always truth in simplicity. Surprisingly, my blog then gained traction and I got quite some followings, and that's what encouraged me to keep on writing, and to even write a novel in the end.

Is the blog still online? Do you still update it?

There was too much dirt on me on that website. So I've burned it to the ground and sealed it with some spells I got from a *dukun* in my village, that way nobody can revive it! Haha. Anyway, I think I have outgrown it (the old blog), and now I'm writing on another medium called Patreon, which is a platform that allows content creators to run a subscription service. That's a good way to share my stories, while also supporting me financially as a writer.

You mentioned blogs and Carrie Bradshaw. Can you say a bit more about writers who inspire you or who you admire?

I would say I'm someone who can't really detach one thing from another. And maybe because I have faced so many injustices in my life, it influenced how my admiration or love should be channelled. I won't support or like anything from anyone whom I find disagreeable in how they live their lives or view the world. But I'm not a good person myself, so it has nothing to do with what's right and what's not right. It is something very personal.

The catcher in the rye by J.D. Salinger is a very special book for me. Its minimalist prose agrees with my tongue, and it helped me to be more confident with my own writing style, which was (many people said) not very literary, not poetic. The eccentricity of the

characters, the anxiety they have, and how it is delivered through stream of consciousness sentences, makes me feel like I'm holding hands with my good friend when reading it.

Writers that I would like to hang out with are Chuck Palahniuk and Andrew Sean Greer. Chuck, for his unconventional stories. Many people would say his stories are gruesome, but they are, for me, the very act of resistance against what's expected by society – which is to conform to norms and produce generic stories. But it's like he said 'fuck it' to it all, and just went with how he liked his stories to be told. And the fact that he sold many and made it as a writer, is the proof that many people are not as bland, but darker than what's displayed. He taught me how to be bolder. And Andrew because he won the Pulitzer for his book *Less*, which I admire and am fond of. I also drew inspiration from Mohammed Choukri, with his book *For bread alone* which I found very raw and organic, realistic and grounded. There are many other books that left a big impression on me, like *What's eating Gilbert Grape* by Peter Hedges, *Bilangan Fu* by Ayu Utami, *This boy's life* by Tobias Wolff, the *Tintin* series by Hergé, The *Crayon Shin-chan* comic books by Yoshito Usui, among others.

Your own writing also often focuses on characters who don't quite fit in, or who are marginalised in some way. Can you pick one or two such characters from your writing and say a bit more about what you wanted to explore with them?

It makes me sick when these characters that are often depicted in stories, whether in movies or novels, are portrayed according to what the hyper capitalist world we live in is expecting. It teaches us to hate ourselves as a means of commercial exploitation through advertising. But this is only one aspect. What I'm trying to say is, the main characters are always this handsome tall man, or the pretty little girl with nice hair, smart people with a nice upbringing and nice home, very romantic heterosexual couples with office jobs, and so on. I mean this is very dangerous because it's become the standard, and people are yearning for this unrealistic idealisation, which is then used by the greedy people to get their money; you need to have fair skin, you need to be leaner, need to be taller, need to have a perfect smile, need to be school smart, need to have an office job, it's never ending! It's stupid and mean. And writers should not be romanticising these traits. Real people lead real lives and they are not like this. They have asymmetrical faces, have a beer belly, they're lazy, queer, not the captain of the cheerleading squad or some sort of masculine sports prodigy, they're poor and not smart, they fart around and have food stuck between their teeth, and they are the main characters too. And many writers just use these realistic people as their side characters.

[If you ask me to pick particular characters] I can't think of any characters in my novel, honestly, it's hard. In *Maya* and in *Love, lies and indomee*, both the protagonists Maya and Ratu, are strong female characters, which to many people are considered too much or even unlikeable. But these people exist. We don't have to like everything about someone, do we? Just because they're confused about their lives doesn't mean they're bad. My characters are always people who try to find out things about themselves.

I'm also upset with the portrayal of queer characters that often are just a token member of the group, or just a laughing stock for the hetero viewers/readers. It is as if they're portrayed as funny and one dimensional, and don't have sensitivity in their feelings or they are often viewed as the villain too. And coming from the community itself, I always

feel the need to speak the reality that I know of, which is hopefully also the truth (at least from my point of view) – that the queers (we're talking about the characters in *Not a virgin* and *Gula, gula, gula*) are just as complex; they can be anything.

And reading about the working class written by the people who can't live without air-conditioning could be a brutal experience. What do they even know? Have they ever asked about our feelings? Do they think it is romantic to be poor?

I'm not trying to be political in my writing, as someone has said about me: that I have a political gay agenda when writing. I want to say that I write to deliver the stories, as raw as possible. And how the stories are shaped and formed, it is inevitably influenced by everything that I am: where and how I was raised, my surrounding, my experiences, my sexuality, my religion, my education. My choice of words in my prose and the shape of my characters are manifestations of everything that's happened to me as the vessel of the work itself. And who I am is this: I'm a queer Muslim coming from the working class, raised in a village in Indonesia. I am not trying to influence anyone with my world view. People have choices and I'm just telling my stories. But writing and reading is always a political act, in a sense, whether you realise it or not.

While your protagonists are always Indonesian, you have often chosen a setting outside of Indonesia. Why is that?

I could say that it's such a fun game to put a character in the world that they're not familiar with. It will create chaos and a sense of displacement, accompanied by logistic issues, it will build the tension, make for good stories. I could also say it is the real depiction of how our world currently works. The movement. The never-ending movement, the criss-crossing. We are no longer constrained or limited by spaces. People are becoming citizens of the world. More connected and blended. Flights are more affordable, communications are easier. It's the trend, to travel and to be somewhere else. Maybe I'm a victim of the travelling adverts constantly fed to me through my social media algorithm. Maybe it is a depiction of how reluctant I was to be in my own country. I can also say that it is what the readers want: to discover new things from reading fiction. They want to be transported to another realm, to be taken out of their reality for a while. To make them taste the land that is not their ground, even if only through the world of words. In short, it's just a writer's tactic to produce something alluring!

But honestly? I didn't choose it.

Sometimes stories grow organically, and the settings help build up the world. They (the settings) keep the plot moving. I can't just write about boys and their German sugar daddies, who stay in Jakarta all the time. Actually, I can ... but the truth is (based on research I've done for my novel *Gula, Gula, Gula*), these boys are brought to Germany and that's where the story peaks. The boys want to be there to have another kind of life. I would say the setting is needed, and it was laid there because when I was writing, I didn't think of dissecting whole stories from the different theoretical, intellectual aspects behind it. I think it is your job ... or other PhD students to do it [the dissection]. My job was to deliver the stories – just to write – which is already a hard enough job itself.

And another thing, though I have come to realise that humans basically have the same dictionary of emotions and feelings (pardon me if I'm wrong), and because I always write from the point of view of a first person, it sounds very tricky for me to speak through the tongue from characters that are not Indonesian. The foreigners, I don't know how their

mind works, what's the engine in their head, how their hearts react to something. It's still a mystery to me. And though I interact with many friends that are not Indonesian, I don't think I would do them justice – to speak from their side as the main characters, at least not yet. Maybe I will do it in the future, who knows, if I am still writing.

What do you think are the main challenges to making it as a writer in Indonesia today?

I honestly don't know. I never thought about it that much. I used to think, and it was also my experience, that in order to be published you need to try to write what the market wants. That way you are going to sell, and publishers will be pleased. But times are changing, the trend is different. There was a phase when publishers would look into your social media accounts and see how many followers you had and how actively you were posting, which was already a good marketing for them. In that way being published actually has nothing to do with the quality of your writing.

The biggest challenge still, and I think it's universal, is how one can't live from one's own writing. Which is sad. The lack of appreciation from the government, or the society itself makes the act of writing or writer as a profession seem unrealistic. If people have to have a second job to pay the bills, then most of their energy has already been used up. The act of writing itself would be too exhausting. I would also want to say that in many cases, the act of writing can only be done comfortably by people who already have privilege. Privileged enough to have a net to save them. And I think it is important, if you want to foster empathy, to give spaces to hear voices from people who can't afford to be full time writers. Let's hear the stories from the working class, not only from people who live comfortably in a penthouse.

You've had a number of writer's residencies abroad and also some support from the Indonesian government for your writing. I imagine this must be quite liberating for you as a writer but also might bring its own set of pressures?

If everything in life is easy, then there would be no stories. It's the friction that makes good stories. Liberating and giving pressure, they're not contradictory, are they? Those words, how true you put them for me. The writers' residencies that I got – it is freeing to be able to get out of my usual system and to just experience something new, to see the world with new glasses, they also sometimes gave me the taste to be my true self – without being afraid of getting any harm. More than that, residencies mean a nice clean bed, space on my own, a desk to write, free electricity, hot water for the shower. I'd also have my own kitchen and delicious meals, these are the kind of luxury that I don't usually have. So, there's that ... but more importantly the chance to be connected with other writers and artists, and be inspired through this interaction. Though I like to be alone, it is also such a nice feeling to meet people who understand what I'm doing; writing is very lonely sometimes. And just to be in a foreign land sometimes give me education. There's this phrase said by Prophet Muhammad (the authenticity is debated), it goes: اطلبوا العلم ولو كان بالصين which means: 'Seek knowledge even if it takes you to China.' I take these words to my heart because it puts value on education, like it is a universal pursuit, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. And I see residencies as aligning with this saying.

And then the pressure ... sometimes the organisation that sponsored me has asked me to write something for them, which is understandable, though I'm easily stressed, but I think I can always manage all the time. And sometimes they also give me full freedom to use the time and space just to do what I please and immerse myself in my creative process (whatever that is), which is very generous. Nothing is really free. We always have to cooperate. Residencies have helped me in getting recognition, but if I had my own funds, I would just travel and do the residencies on my own, exploring the world and seeing things and writing about anything from butterflies to the dirty sewers to how the mountains are broken into pieces by the missiles. I don't like feeling indebted.

There's always a cost when you rely on someone else's money, even if it's not written down.

But that's the reality I'm in. For now, I take what I can get and make the most of it. These experiences – both the freedom and the pressure – become part of my stories, part of who I am as a writer. And maybe, in a way, that's its own kind of liberation.

I understand that your novels have always been written first in Indonesian. You've previously mentioned the limitations of Indonesian. What are they? And do you have writing projects where you are writing first in English?

It is because of my upbringing. I speak Sundanese in my home and in my village and spoke Indonesian at school. Both these languages are tied to the norms and regulations that I am familiar with. I know it is only in my head, but it is inherent, and ingrained there. It's hard to just delete that from my head. I was taught Islamic teaching in both languages (Sundanese and Indonesian). I lived in a *pesantren* from when I was 13 years old. I grew up with laws, rules, what's good and bad according to Islam, and it is in my tongue. And so, when I write in Indonesian, I feel like there is part of my body that forces me to be modest and honest – not to write too sexy, it's a sin, it's embarrassing, to be appropriate and things. Use other words and don't be too graphic – I'm psychoanalysing myself now.

But that's not the only reason, I think it is also because the rejections that I received from the publishers (in Indonesia) made me self-censor. It makes me want to tone myself down. It's silly.

I used to want to be accepted, now I have moved on from that. I'll write what I want, however I want it. This is when I started to write in English. It's just called for by the drafts, really: they wanted to be written in English because the prose runs better that way. I somehow feel more freedom in this language too. Since my head didn't lace the language with my childhood norms, now my fingers can say anything. This is also not the language the publishers (in Indonesia) use, so it gives me more freedom. I have actually written two novels in English, 'The sewer rat', that was eventually translated into French and won the award (yet to be published in English or any other language as of now), and my offbeat pandemic novel that got longlisted in a Southeast Asian novel competition based in Singapore (still unpublished). I'm currently writing the sequel to 'The sewer rat' in English too. But I will write in Indonesian again for other stories. I don't think that creativity should be limited by certain mediums, in this case language. I have some people telling me that I should write in the language I feel most comfortable with: Indonesian. But I feel it's constraining, limiting, and censoring. The expectation that is imposed on me, is so uncreative and boring, simplistic, and narrow. Such a bias. They said I would not write as

well in English because I would lose the music, but I don't think I'm stupid. I always know how my stories should be delivered. I think I have it in me to understand writing.

Several of your novels have been first published in languages other than Indonesian. Why is that? Can you also say something here about the overseas publishers who have been interested in your work – how has that happened?

I think it has something to do with how I delivered my stories and how some people who have power to gatekeep the publications in Indonesia don't find they are good enough for their taste. But this is just my speculation, not necessarily the truth. Many aspects of publication are not really my speciality, because my job is to write, and analysing the aspects beyond it, is, you know ... I don't really have the tools or energy for it.

I would say [one reason for being published first overseas] is because I write queer stories, with many rich and queer elements in them, whether that includes actual gay characters or not. I put the marginalised people or characters at the centre of the stories, which maybe some people find strange and difficult and perhaps disgusting and wrong. Writing about young boys studying in a *pesantren* but at the same time working in a gay club [which happens in *Not a virgin*]? That is perhaps a fraction about reality that they don't wish to know. I remember one editor was repulsed by it and even told me to pray.

I struggled for years thinking that my writings are bad because of the many rejections I have faced. Given these publishers are in a Muslim majority country, I don't think they will ever want to normalise the queer, which contradicts those teachings. So queer stories censorship is something that is being heavily practised or maybe inherent in the publishing industry. I think they're thinking about the backlash that they will receive, and so on. But there are some people in publishing who are very brave and have given space to the (queer) stories, they all need to be acknowledged and recognised.

But there's something about writing, is an old magic anyway, the act of writing, when you believe in your story and you delivered it as honestly as possible, it will find its way to be out there. I would say luck has played a part in the process of publishing (in other languages), but I would also like to believe that this is because I worked hard for it too. I refused to be silenced or erased, so I tried to find a way for my stories to be heard. One door closed, but that doesn't mean I can't knock on other doors. And that's what I have been doing. I met my foreign publishers online. And each of them is a different story. My Malaysian publisher found me on my Facebook, and I found my French publisher on Twitter.

You have participated in various literary festivals in Indonesia and abroad. Do you enjoy them? How do they work for you?

I am not a big fan of the spotlight. I actually hate to be on the stage. I don't think I'm a very good speaker. Most of the time I will be upset after I make an appearance. I will think I have said something stupid. *L'esprit de l'escalier*, the staircase wit. I will think I could have said something smarter or wittier, but the moment has passed, and I don't like this kind of feeling. I'm full of regret.

But they helped, these literary festivals. I remember my first literary festival was in 2017 in Ubud, in Bali and I couldn't have been prouder, because I finally got invited into one

and was surrounded by people who did the same thing. I thought I was in my tribe finally, but then I got very lonely because I knew nobody then. It's different now. It takes time. Literary festivals are the chance to bump into sexy literary people, talking and chatting. The place to introduce myself to new readers, to be connected, it's amplifying my voice, and public presence is important. I look at it as a job though ... not because I like it. My energy gets depleted so fast after meeting lots of people. I don't enjoy talking that much. But I got to be invited to the Frankfurt Book Fair, twice, and though it's amazing to be there, I was always terrified before I got on to the stage. And also, because I have to speak in English, to process all the answers in my head before I speak them, I'm burning so many brain cells there. I'm usually very stressed after and before it. I like to sit in the corner and do nothing, you know. Haha. But I really like to be in the festivals, and that's why they should be more accessible. Many of us can't really afford them.

Given you are in the UK at the moment, is there one thing in particular you enjoy about being here? And what is it you miss most from Indonesia?

I like the filter black coffee at Pret a Manger, thrift stores, and Peckham. These are three things I'd definitely put in my dating profile. Haha.

Honestly, I used to be amazed by almost everything, but these days, I feel so worn out. My childish side and naivety have dried up, and it's a bit concerning because I see less magic everywhere – not just in the UK. Maybe the UK itself has changed too. Soho and Greenwich, for example, aren't like they used to be. But no matter what, I'll always appreciate the UK because it's the country that catalysed me to become a full-time writer.

What do I miss about Indonesia? There's a reason why people invaded it in the past – they couldn't replicate the spices we have! I miss the food, how affordable everything is, and the sun. Indonesia is so warm and friendly, in every sense of the word.

What are your plans next?

I don't know. I don't have any plans.

Thanks so much for taking part in this interview and answering all my questions, Nuril.