

ANDREA HIRATA: INDONESIA'S BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

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From Village Boy to Literary Icon

By: Yvette Benningshof

Andrea Hirata's debut novel *Laskar Pelangi* turned him instantly into Indonesia's best-selling author to date. Published in 2005 and now over 5 million copies sold, the story assured him long-term success. His book is translated into 26 foreign languages, made into an award winning movie, a musical and soon to become a 15 episode TV series. He has written 7 novels and a short story. 'Just recently I assured myself I can be a writer,' says the man who is currently Indonesia's most favorite author.

Laskar Pelangi (The Rainbow Troops) is about a tight-knit group of students and their teachers in a fight for the right to education and a better future. The story is set on Pulau Belitung, an island south east of Sumatra, which is characterized by its magnificent nature. But it is also where local communities live in chronic poverty, despite the rich natural resources.

Life on Pulau Belitung

On Belitung island a Dutch company used to control the tin mining business. The families and their children lived in an enclosed society with their own fenced villas and school. 'We were not allowed to attend their school,' says Hirata, who was one of the main guests at this year's Ubud Writers and Readers Festival in Bali. 'We always watched this enclave from a distance.'



Andreas Hirata, By: Ariantyo Pratisto

There was no school for the village kids and a young determined teacher decided to open one by herself. She needed at least 10 students to start teaching. Hirata: 'The school meant so much to us, although it was just a small classroom with limited materials. When it rained, the roof leaked, when it was windy it almost collapsed. But we loved it. It was a place where we absorbed all the information, shared our problems in life and got inspired by our dedicated teachers about the importance of education and to fulfill our dreams.'



Reading from his first short story 'Dry Season' at the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival, By: Ubud Writers and Readers Festival

The Power of Knowledge

Hirata takes the reader on a journey and make one almost become part of the 'rainbow warriors'. This group of close friends evokes the readers' empathy as they face challenges and overcome difficulties together. The book was the first one in The Rainbow Troops Quartet: *Sang Pemimpi* (The Dreamer), *Edensor* and *Maryamah Karpov* completed the series.

All novels are inspired by the life of Hirata, born on Pulau Belitung, who studied Economics and graduated from the University of Indonesia. He received scholarships from the European Union to get his master's degree at the Sorbonne in Paris and at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK.

Hirata used to work at telecommunication company PT Telkom but had never written a literary piece until that day in 2005. 'I sat down in my room in Bandung and started writing. Three weeks later, I had 600 pages,' he says. 'I wrote it as a tribute to my teacher in Belitung. I never intended to publish it. I only sent it to my old school friends who are characters in the book as well. One of them sent a copy to a publisher and to my surprise it became a bestseller.'

Three years later the story made its way successfully to the cinema. It won awards at film festivals in Bandung, Hong Kong and Iran. The producer Mira Lesmana and director Riri Riza recently got together again to make the story into a musical which was performed at Taman Ismail Marzuki in Jakarta and The Esplanade in Singapore.

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See the trailer for *Laskar Pelangi* here:



For a snapshot of the musical see below:



The Success of *The Rainbow Troops*

A year after the movie, the book was translated into English entitled *The Rainbow Troops*. Hirata has traveled the world, dividing his time between Jakarta and Ubud and has seven novels to his name. Recently he was a writer in residence at the prestigious University of Iowa. Just last year he quit his job to become a full time writer. 'It was only after my first short story 'Dry Season' was published in the Washington Square Review magazine, that I assured myself that I can be a writer', he remarks.

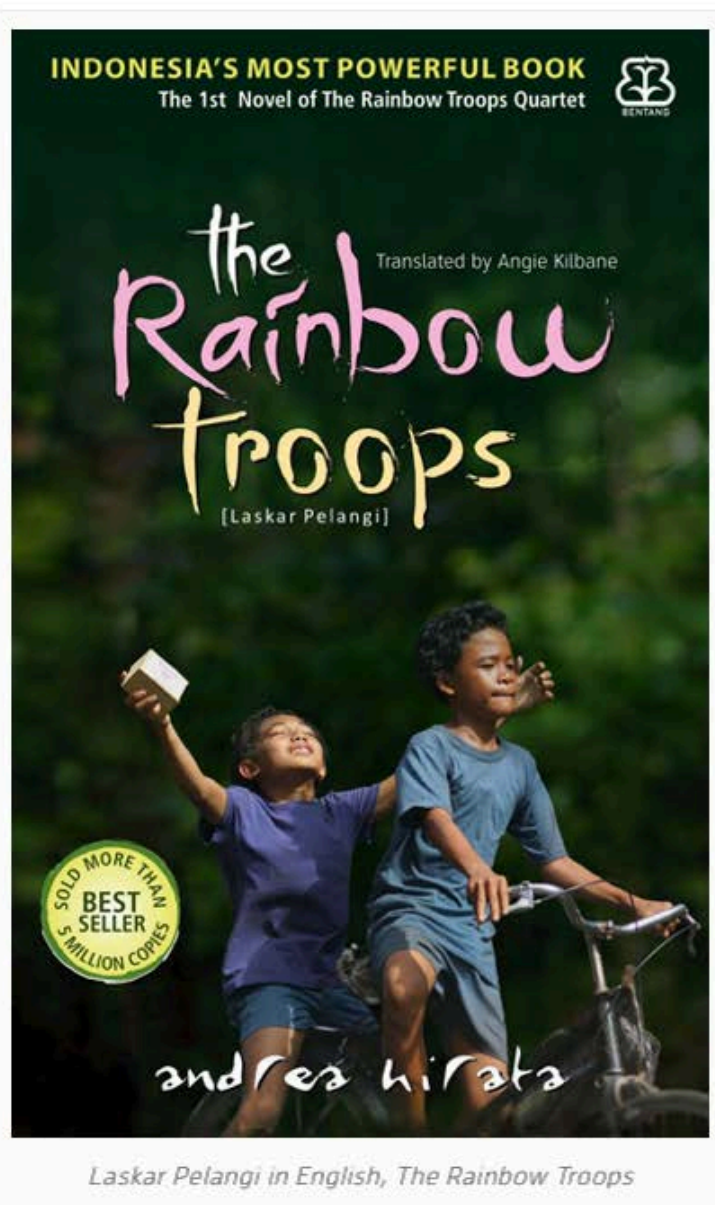
The Indonesian audience loves him, because it's easy to identify with the theme of growing up in a small community, the importance of education and to chase after your dreams. His books are uplifting to lots of readers, inspiring them to live the life they like to live. 'Some readers even say that they feel prettier when they look in the mirror after reading my novels and that they are better in expressing their feelings', Hirata says as he smiles. 'Some critics say that I always write about the same thing and that I already wrote a book: *Laskar Pelangi*. That I should leave it to that. Well, that's too late now!'

Also his personal life has changed. 'I have been absent to attend Java Jazz in Jakarta the last years, because people like to take pictures with me and have my autograph. I do not identify myself as a celebrity, but it's natural when your books are read by millions of people. Without readers I'm nothing.'

The success story of *Laskar Pelangi* keeps on going: a 15 episode TV series will come on national television. Although Hirata always said that he didn't want his precious book to become a *sinetron*, local soap opera. Finally he agreed on it, also because the scriptwriter will be Salman Aristo, the same one that wrote the script for *Laskar Pelangi*. The series will be airing on SCTV during the school holidays at the end of this year. 'I realize that through television we can reach a lot more Indonesians than with movie screenings and books.'

His novels have a huge impact on tourism on Belitung Island, which was best known for its tin mining industry. Last year there was a true *Laskar Pelangi* Festival and there are special tours that trace back the steps of Hirata's novel. 'We have the most beautiful beaches in the world. The situation improved very much and students can get scholarships more easily. The natural resources should be managed properly though. What happened to my society still happens now in Indonesia and all over the world. The natives are left behind, while big companies exploit the resources,' Hirata comments.

At the moment he is taking care of his parents on Belitung, who are in their late eighties and have declining health condition. In the meantime, he is also finishing his eighth novel entitled *Ayah* (Father).



Laskar Pelangi in English, The Rainbow Troops