



## **Indonesian & Malaysian Joy**

### **Reading and Viewing List from PLL Trip Scholar John W. Williams, JD**

#### **Places to Start**

As I surveyed the possibilities—films and books—both fiction and non-fiction—I was struck by a common thread. No matter the country—Indonesia or Malaysia (and other nations of Southeast Asia)—everything is layered. This is equally true of the genre, the perspective (colonizer—Dutch and English—or colonized), the race or ethnicity (Javanese, Balinese, Sumatran, Malay, Chinese, Indian, or European), or the era (colonialism, Japanese occupation, pre-liberation, Communist uprisings, post-independence struggles). This can be explained by the deeply influential ancient cultures—Javanese, Hindu, and Chinese mythologies are still powerful. Now, add in the complex struggle between past, present, and future, or the struggle of modernity. What is it to be “modern?”

Many of these books are available on Kindle.

#### **Film:**

##### **Bridge over the River Kwai (1957)**

While this famous and award-winning movie is set in Siam (Thailand), it is in the context of the defeat of the British in Malaya and Singapore by the Japanese. More importantly, it represents the clash of cultures, even civilizational views. More than a heroic adventure film, it is layered. There are three perspectives—the Japanese military culture, a different sense of honor—British honor, and American pragmatism. The swift defeat of the French, British, Dutch, and Americans in Southeast Asia herald the collapse of the European empires.

##### **Year of Living Dangerously (1982)**

A young Australian radio reporter (Mel Gibson in an early role) covers the opening days of the 1965 communist uprising across Indonesia. He has two guides, a British diplomat (Sigourney Weaver) and an Indonesia assistant (Linda Hunt). Each represents a distinct perspective on the coming events. The movie captures the god-like reverence in which Indonesians held their first president, Sukarno. As you watch the movie, pay particular attention to the depiction of the Wayang, the ancient art of shadow puppetry. It is not

entertainment, it is deep, mythical Javanese epic story telling. This movie gives a powerful sense of the time and place of the events.

### **Fiction:**

#### **This Earth of Mankind**, Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1996)

This is the first book of Pramoedya's epic Buru Quartet. It is a bittersweet coming-of-age novel set in the last years of the Dutch colonial rule. Pramoedya, one of Indonesia's most famous writers, wrote the story while imprisoned by the Dutch and later by President Suharto on the prison island of Buru.

#### **Man Tiger**, Eka Kurniawan (2015)

This contemporary novel by another renowned Indonesian writer, weaves a story between a young man and a mythical creature. Nominated for the International Booker Prize, it explores human nature and the complexities of Indonesian village life.

#### **The Garden of Evening Mists**, Tan Twan Eng (2012)

Tan Twan Eng has written a number of novels; some set in the Japanese-occupied Malaya or immediately post-WW II. This novel is one of the most read and was shortlisted for the 2012 Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction. The story follows a woman's journey to create a garden in the highlands. It explores memory, loss, and the impact of war. The protagonist was a lone survivor of a Japanese prison camp; her gardener had been the gardener for the Emperor. Tan Twan Eng's first novel, **The Gift of Rain**, was set in Penang during WW II.

#### **Lord Jim**, Joseph Conrad (written between 1899-1900) (book or movie with Peter O'Toole, 1965)

This Conrad story, made into a Hollywood film, introduced Americans to the Spice Islands. It is the story of a disgraced English seaman who finds his way to the East Indies and, eventually, redemption. It gives you a feel for 19<sup>th</sup> Century colonialism and imperialism.

#### **And The Rain My Drink**, Han Suyin (1956)

The renowned Chinese author Han Suyin's novel captures the Emergency Period in Malaysia (post WWII into the early 1950s). Foreshadowing the war in Vietnam, British forces were able to suppress the bitter guerrilla war with communist insurgents. Local Chinese, Indians, and native Malays suffered greatly. Defeat of the communists paved the way for Malayan independence (which originally included Singapore).

## **Non-Fiction:**

### **Journey Through Indonesia**, Tim Hannigan (2018)

Hannigan, a former correspondent based in Indonesia, records his travels and discoveries as he reported on the country.

### **Brief History of Indonesia: Sultans, Spices & Tsunamis**, Tim Hannigan (2015)

Hannigan provides an overview of Indonesia's history from the ancient civilizations through colonialism to independence.

### **Indonesia, Etc., Exploring the Improbable Nation**, Elizabeth Pisani (2014)

Considered one of the best nonfiction books on Indonesia, the author (a correspondent for Reuters) recounts her travels from island to island. The subtitle captures her theme—an improbable nation of immensely different islands and cultures. Her travelogue delves into history, culture, and politics.

### **Indonesian Upheaval**, John Hughes (1967)

John Hughes, then the Southeast Asia correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor* (and later its editor), won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the attempted communist Chinese uprising in 1965. Had it succeeded, America's focus on Vietnam may have changed significantly. If you can find a copy, it is excellent to pair with the movie, *Year of Living Dangerously*. I found a used copy online; you might ask your local library to find a copy to check out.

## **“History of Malaysia”**

There are several accessible and recent histories of Malaysia, published in 2024 and 2025: **History of Malaysia: A Captivating Guide to Ancient Kingdoms, Colonial Melaka, Modernization, and the Post-Independence Years**, or **The History of Malaysia: From Pre-History to Federation Emergence**. These are part of a competing series of regional history books.

### **Billion Dollar Whale: The Man Who Fooled Wall Street, Hollywood, and the World**, Tom Wright & Bradley Hope (2018)

This is an account of one of the world's biggest financial frauds, putting Malaysia on the map and churning its political and economic landscape. The 1MDB scandal involved the government's sovereign wealth fund, Goldman Sachs, and Leonardo di Caprio. For a quick summary of the scheme, go to YouTube and search for one of these short videos: “The Man Behind the Biggest Financial Fraud” (Vice News) or “The Man Behind the \$4 Billion 1MDB

Con” (Bloomberg Original). The first video interviews the authors of the **Billion Dollar Whale**.