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Sarita Newson: Building ideals by the book

Trisha Sertori , CONTRIBUTOR , Sanur | Thu, 02/12/2009 1:40 PM | People



(JP/J.B. Djwan)

The eggs are cooking and the air, rich with the smells of freshly brewed coffee and buttered toast, rings with the chatter and laughter of family.

It's Saturday morning at publisher Sarita Newson's family home in Sanur.

At 56, New Zealand-born Newson has spent all her adult life in Indonesia. Wanderlust, fueled by an uncle's wartime memories of Bali, led her to the island when she was 20. She married and had three children, and is now enjoying time with her two-year-old grandson.

Many of the years were tough; after her marriage broke down, she worked full-time while raising her children alone. Her children, today successful professionals who all get along, are living proof of her well-managed juggling act.

In the mid-1980s, Newson established a graphic design business – one of the earliest agencies of its kind in Bali. During the slow times she turned to the exacting and costly work of book publishing – resulting in Saritaksu Publishing.

But publishing, she admits, can be “a bit scary”.

“One part of that is you always want to strive for the very best; another aspect is that authors are lovely, but not always easy to work with. You also never know if the book will take off and sell – publishing is not an easy way to make money,” Newson says.

“One day a struggling young author will arrive on my doorstep and sell a million copies – it's every publisher's dream. And I would love it to be an Indonesian. If you can get a good translation and then get the books out, there is a very good possibility of that happening,” says Newson who is on the steering committee of the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival (UWRF), which brings her into contact

with Indonesia's emerging writers.

“Global markets means the walls are coming down. That's another reason I love being in the UWRF – I am seeing more and more Indonesian writers getting involved and that gives them international exposure.”

Among her portfolio, Newson is most proud of a series of environmental books for school children. The first book in the trilingual series authored by Maggie Dunkle was *The Turtle and The Dolphin*. Soon to be released is *The Seagull and The Heron* set in Bali's central hills.

“The first book was [set] on the coast, looking at rubbish there. The second is [in] the central hills, seeing rubbish in rivers and how kids can influence their communities not to throw waste in the river,” says Newson. “Kids are very good at shaming their parents into things. These are the adults of tomorrow – they will have the right way of seeing things. I suppose these books are about building ideals. I just love this because kids are so receptive.”

Saritaksu is also working with the East Bali Poverty project to inspire poor kids to turn their lives around. “We are doing books for children called *The Art of Learning by Doing*. We hope to start with schools in Karangasem and are looking for sponsorship. There is such a lot of poverty in that region.”

The books aim to help kids recognize their abilities, not only in schoolwork but for the life skills that may prove the very tools to break the poverty trap.

“People seem to think you need to have an education to succeed, but you can also succeed by doing,” Newson says.

One suggestion is organic vegetable gardens at school.

“Kids grow the plants and take home the produce – they are so proud when they show their parents what they have achieved. The book also has a large section on health and nutrition – the real basics. The aim is to bring up people so they are well enough to concentrate. If you are not eating well how can you learn?”

She hopes *The Art of Learning by Doing* will help kids develop healthier diets, and thus improve their ability to learn.

“Where there is a culture of poverty people live in despair. But when you offer kids ways to change their lives the bells ring and kids can make those changes,” Newson says of the power of books to offer new ways of seeing old problems. “It is very much about putting tools in people's hands so they can change their own lives.”

And for others, a brush with poverty can be a reality check, she says.

“I think perhaps the current global economic crisis is actually a good thing and can have a positive effect. In some ways this will make people rethink what they want in life and for their societies. The way things have gone we can see that capitalism doesn't really hold the answers,” says Newson.

“If we look back to how Balinese adults and societies have evolved over the centuries we can learn a lot. We learn to work together and help each other out in the good times and the bad.”

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