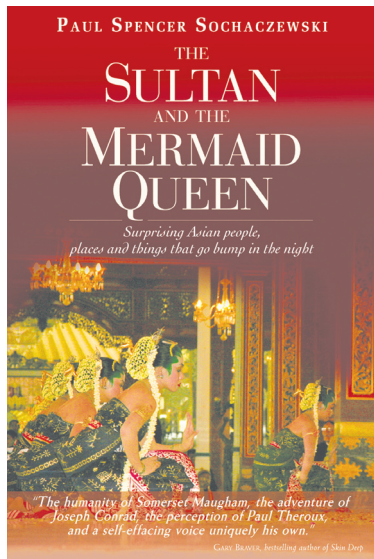


# TOKO BUKU

Reviews of English language books on Indonesia

By Pak Bill

## The Sultan and the Mermaid Queen by Paul Spencer Sochaczewski



If you believe that the world is an endlessly curious place where strange events occur without any plausible explanation, you'll love *The Sultan and the Mermaid Queen*. Tiger magicians? Cool. A lost tribe of giant white cannibals? Why not? Hobbits? Let's go.

This wonderful 372-page collection of columns, articles and short essays captures the picturesque and intimate side of

Asian life over the past 30 years, taking readers on an exotic exploration of the unique cultures, places, people and legends which encompass all the giddy diversity of Asia.

*The Sultan and the Mermaid Queen's* true stories, covering both historical and modern day culture, describe an alternate view of a world that is becoming inundated by mass tourism and globalization. The anthology of articles, brims over with "bump in the night" tales of dragon princesses, 'lightning teeth' and 'dinosaur fishes', as well as profiles of unsung heroes stretching from Bhutan to Borneo to Komodo Island.

Readers will meet the last elephant hunter of Vietnam, a man who has reached the celebrity status of Michael Jordan through his endorsements of Asian products, and a homeless man in Hawaii who has the résumé to prove that he's the *real* last Emperor of China.

In another piece we learn how Alfred Wallace Russell, a 19th Century British naturalist, might have a better claim to the theory of natural selection than Charles Darwin. We discover how to bargain for good luck on 'Amulet Island' in the Philippines. Yet another captivating story tells of Indian villagers who are angry at one of their more popular gods because the deity absconded with one of the local mountains.

The son of Polish émigrés to Brooklyn, Paul Spencer Sochaczewski is a successful writer and journalist, an inveterate world traveler, and the leader of two popular creative writing workshops. He first arrived in Sarawak in 1969 as a Peace Corps volunteer, eventually embarking on a writing career and a life-long fascination with Asia.

*Sultan and the Mermaid Queen* includes a selection of some 70 of the more than 600 articles Paul has published in the *International Herald Tribune*, *GQ*, *CNN Traveller*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Geographical*. He has assembled them into a rough thematic order, but one of the pleasures of the book is that each story stands on its own merits and can be easily read at one sitting.

To Sochaczewski life is frustrating and bittersweet on the front lines of the conservation movement. When he worked for the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), he warned of a rampant commercialism that threatened to become irreversible - even in remote areas. Take for example the growing market for turtle meat, shark's fin and skinned birds of paradise.

The author relates the politically thrilling story of Bruno Manser, a 'Swiss Robin Hood', who mysteriously disappeared in Malaysian Borneo in 2000 while encouraging the semi-nomadic Penan tribe to fight against timber

operators who were decimating the tribe's ancestral forest home.

The title of the book gives away the topic of one of the longer pieces, an Indonesian love story centuries old but still widely celebrated in central Java. In Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX of Yogyakarta's own words, we learn of his love affair with the Mermaid Queen, the Goddess of the South Seas.

In fact, one of the best bits of philosophy in the whole book comes from the late sultan who says, "You can't always ask a Western question to an Asian situation. You may believe the story or not, but don't always try to analyze with your Cartesian mind."

Sochaczewski writes in layers – like a curry – with lots of different things happening simultaneously in his writing: historical references, parallels with other cultures and happenings, idiosyncratic cultural anecdotes.

Although there are undeniably humorous incidents in the book, he is more a serious than a 'funny' writer. Indeed, humor is a very tricky commodity and often falls flat in prose. If it works at all, it works best when the writer doesn't take himself too seriously.

In this regard, Sochaczewski maintains a healthy level of modesty and self-deprecation. He avoids the temptation of making excessive observations about the people he profiles. He lets readers judge for themselves.

He writes in first person, but this book is not autobiography. Though Sochaczewski is not the story, he definitely is part of the story, the catalyst, the guy who lights the fuse.

Perhaps the author himself says it best: "I'm not interested in traveler's tales in which the author gets drunk, loses his passport, has a run-in with local bureaucrats, falls in love with a bar girl. Good travel writing shines a little beam of light on both the writer and the subject, and makes an attempt to put things in context, even if that context is a movable feast. I like to look into the fog, and slowly try to discern shapes, relationships, and, if I'm lucky, a bit of meaning. But sometimes all that can be seen is the fog, so I describe the miasma. Sometimes meaning is a bonus. Or, as Picasso put it more elegantly, 'when I run out of red I use blue.'"

This first-hand portrayal of people from every corner of Asia is a treasure trove of endearing tales and commentaries, beautifully written in a straightforward style that avoids unduly complicating or over-analyzing the story.

The inscrutable East is alive and well with Paul Sochaczewski. If you like adventuring in Asia, encountering unusual people and exciting travel writing, take along this eclectic and poignant collection of stories on your next trip or as you ease into your rattan easy chair by the rice paddy.

*The Sultan and the Mermaid Queen* by Paul Spencer Sochaczewski, Editions Didier Millet 2009, ISBN 9814217743, 256 pages.

Available for approximately Rp140,000 at Periplus Bookshops, Gramedia Bookstores, Ary's and Ganesha Bookshop in Ubud and Ganesha@Biku in Kerobokan.

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