

Winter 2003

Book Review: The Girl From the Coast

Andrea Kempf

Johnson County Community College, akempf@jccc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/lib_pp



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kempf, Andrea, "Book Review: The Girl From the Coast" (2003). *Library Papers and Presentations*. 9.
http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/lib_pp/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Billington Library at ScholarSpace @ JCCC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Papers and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarSpace @ JCCC. For more information, please contact bbaile14@jccc.edu.

BOOK REVIEW

THE GIRL FROM THE COAST

By PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER

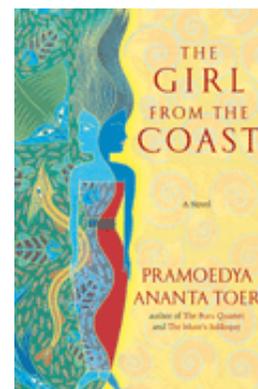
Translated from the Indonesian by Willem Samuels.

New York: Hyperion East, 2002. 288 pages, \$22.95

reviewed by **Andrea Kempf**

Pramoedya Ananta Toer has been called Indonesia's "Grand Old Man of Literature," and his name is regularly mentioned as a serious contender for the Nobel Prize in literature. *The Girl from the Coast* is one of Toer's earlier novels. It was written from 1963 to 1965, shortly before the author was sentenced to hard labor in a prison on the island of Buru, where he spent the next fourteen years. It was while he was imprisoned that he wrote what many consider his masterpiece, the *Buru Quartet*, four intensely political novels that examine modern Javanese history from the turn of the twentieth century to the birth of the Indonesian nation. *The Girl from the Coast*, however, is a more personal novel. Its canvas is smaller, focusing on the life of a young peasant girl from a fishing village who at the age of fourteen is married to an aristocrat in the city. What the young woman doesn't know is that she is merely a practice wife who, once she has produced a child, will be abandoned in favor of an aristocratic woman.

The novel, based on the life of Toer's own grandmother, is clearly a labor of love. The protagonist, who is never named in the narrative, is resilience personified. Torn from her family and deposited in her husband's mansion, she has no one with whom to talk except servants. Her husband, always referred to as the Bendoro (Lord), treats her like a plaything; his relatives treat her with contempt; the servants look upon her with pity because they know her fate. Nonetheless, she adapts to life in her husband's mansion, learns to manage his household, all the while maintaining the values she brought with her from her village. At one point, she returns to visit her village, where she discovers that she has become a living legend, the object of songs about her amazing rise to prosperity. It is in the village that she suffers the realization that her parents won't treat her like their daughter anymore; they are as deferential as her husband's servants. However, the plotting of a treacherous servant, the emissary of an aristocratic woman who aspires to become the real wife of the Bendoro, unites the village in support of its heroine. The villagers feign an attack by



► BUY NOW

pirates to rid themselves of the men hired to murder the Girl from the Coast, and force the plotting servant to either marry one of their own or be killed. In the end, none of this support changes the girl's situation. Once she gives birth to a child, the Bendoro divorces her and keeps the baby, forbidding her to ever attempt to contact him or the child again. Unwilling to face the pity of her village friends, the girl heads inland to make her way in the world. Twenty years later, she accidentally discovers her daughter and is able, in her later life, to enjoy the pleasures of the family she lost.

The narrative is simple and straightforward, but it is laced with folk songs and legends. In telling the story of his grandmother, Toer exposes much of the brutality of Indonesian history during the Dutch colonial period—the building of the big road in Java, during the course of which most of the laborers' babies died; the hypocrisy of the Bendoro, who prays several times a day and devotedly studies the Koran while treating his servants and his "practice" wife like subhuman beings; the precariousness of village life, where each day death may come because of the Dutch, the nobility, pirates, or the ocean itself. The author has never made a secret of his leftist politics. And in many ways his characters are less human beings than representatives of his political philosophy—the noble villagers, the evil aristocrats, the resourceful, intelligent peasant girl. Toer is regularly criticized for producing novels that are more polemic than fiction, for creating characters that are symbols of his ideology rather than rounded human beings. Yet this graceful narrative tells a universal story, of an individual who is victimized by societal strictures and, despite the cruelty of those in power, survives. Replete with poetry, song, and folklore, the novel is almost mythic in nature. *A Girl from the Coast* is an excellent introduction to the works of a master storyteller who has never compromised his principles and who has become a symbol of the defiance of tyranny everywhere.

Andrea Kempf is a professor and librarian at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. She is a regular reviewer of fiction for *Persimmon and Library Journal*.

[HOME](#) | [ABOUT PERSIMMON](#) | [CURRENT ISSUE](#) | [PREVIOUS ISSUES](#) | [ORDER](#) | [SUBMISSIONS](#) | [LINKS](#)

persimmon.mag@worldnet.att.net

© 2002 by Contemporary Asian Culture, Inc. All rights reserved.

