



The Year of Living Dangerously

Christopher J. Koch

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The year is 1965. The fiercely nationalistic government of the god-king Sukarno has brought Indonesia to the brink of chaos. Engulfed in the violence are Guy Hamilton, a Western journalist; Billy Kwan, his Chinese-Australian cameraman; and the young British woman they both love. Kwan's disillusionment with his hero Sukarno leads him to desperate action, and a complex drama of loyalty and betrayal is played out in the eye of the political storm.

The Year of Living Dangerously Details

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From Reader Review *The Year of Living Dangerously* for online ebook

Sangeetha T says

This book is complete and utter shit. It's racist, ableist, fat-phobic, sexist and orientalist, and it manages to do all this in only the first four pages. It is Indonesian post colonial history written from a white colonial gaze. It's disgusting. It makes Indonesians and Sukarno seem like mindless idiots, like they have no political acumen, and what is to be expected when it is written by a white man? White people hate it when we refuse to allow them to exploit and rule us anymore and so this shit is what we get. White people giving this book a good review, you're all fucking racists. The Indonesians giving it a good review? You're even worse. You've bought a version of yourself the White man is selling you. Your internalized racism makes you even more disgusting than the White man cos it's your own people you're selling out. If I could give this book a negative star I would. This book is only for the Asians who like to put down other Asians to get the White mans approval, and the Whites yearning for the good old days where they were rich and could do as they please and think they are somehow better than the rest of us mindless savages. Everyone else, please go read things written by actual Indonesian with a much more nuanced understanding of post colonial Indonesia.

Carmen says

It's always difficult to believe that someone we know well has crossed into that territory where no one from our side can reach him, and from which messages crackle back that no longer make any sense.

Ooooooooooookaaaaaay. So. This was a friend-read with Joe Valdez. This book is not what I thought it was going to be, AT ALL.

BASIC PLOT: The whites stationed in Jakarta, Indonesia form a relatively tight-knit group made up of diplomats, journalists and cameramen. Billy Kwan is a half-Chinese, half-Irish-Australian and a dwarf. He is passionate about helping the poor, keeps elaborate dossiers on all his friends, and is a megalomaniac who thinks he's somewhat of a god. The book, like many many books, implies Kwan is fucked up in the head because he is a dwarf and half-Chinese.

Hamilton is a basically good guy, but glaringly stupid, and he falls into being Kwan's best friend, not realizing the extent of Kwan's machinations on his life.

Let's talk about its strengths and weaknesses.

STRENGTHS:

1.) It's as if you are IN Indonesia. The book is absolutely transporting, you can feel it throbbing with life beneath your fingertips.

Swift evening spreads across Jakarta. The city lies inert in a hot brown twilight, which smells of petrol, frangipani, and fear. All energy burns low, like the failing street lights; but fear mounts like erotic excitement in these stormy nights of the north-west monsoon. Jakarta waits always for explosions.

2.) Koch is a good author. He writes good sentences and is no slouch when it comes to telegraphing both scenery and human nature.

Despite Billy's eccentricity, I had not considered him until that moment to be anything but troubled in a way natural to a man with his disadvantages. This last remark, spoken as though to himself, had opened a door. I felt that I was being warned. But I put the feeling aside, as we nearly always do such warnings.

WEAKNESSES:

1.) The main weakness here, the most disappointing part of the book, is the plot.

Not because, as many claim, this is too 'political' to be read, understood, and liked by the masses, but simply because Koch is not good at writing human stories of human interest.

As in many books, there is the political/intrigue story which runs through the whole book, and then there is the human interest story, the story that deals with how the characters relate/love/hate and interact with each other. It's on this human note that the book fails.

I thought you just said that one of Koch's strengths is writing about human nature.

Yes, it's true that Koch slips little well-written gems about the nature of humans into his book. However, from a 'plot' angle the book is lacking. Our lead, Hamilton, is likable but deeply stupid and it's sometimes hard for the reader to watch his stupid lurchings.

The characters interact with each other in a kind of superficial way which does not endear you to any of them nor cause you to care when they reach some sort of crisis. This is the book's ultimate failure.

I guess one could consider this weakness a 'strength' because it is very true to life. People do things for no discernible reason, and life's mundane conclusions are everyday. However, I read novels to feel for the characters and get worked up about their lives and situations. Koch is unable to wrest those feelings from me. There's a whole lot of build-up and then little consequence. Billy Kwan might be a spy! He is keeping tabs on his friends! He's full of delusions of grandeur! But, you know, nothing really comes of this.

Hamilton and Jillie are having a love affair! He's commitment-phobic! She's (view spoiler)! He's (view spoiler)! All of this should be super-exciting to me, a romance junkie, but the way Koch writes it it is dull as dust. I couldn't get worked up about any of it.

A Russian woman slinks onto the ~~screen~~ page. Is she a spy? Is Hamilton going to sleep with her? What are her evil plans? Don't get excited - where is this going? You've guessed it! Pretty much nowhere with no consequences and no major events.

Koch is a master of introducing things that you THINK are going to be exciting and finally get the plot going, but then taking them exactly nowhere. Again, much like real life - most of it is mundane - but terrible for what is falsely labeled as an 'adventure novel.'

2.) You're going to have to slog through some perversions to read this book. How much this bothers you (child rape and creepers of every stripe) depends on your sensitivity levels, I guess. All sexual perversions are completely brushed off in this book as 'no big deal,' so don't think anyone is actually upset about pedophilia or whatever. It's all cool! Ugh.

The Wikipedia summary of this novel is absolutely horrendous. Not only do I think it is inaccurate as to the book's events, but it completely doesn't capture the spirit and the heart of the novel... which I guess is understandable. I read it after the book was over, to see what they had to say about the book and I was violently disappointed.

The back of my book says, "A compelling tale of romance and the political turmoil of twentieth-century Indonesia!" which is a complete lie.

Tl;dr - Indonesia drips off the pages of this book. Koch occasionally offers some startling insights into human nature. However, the plot is plodding, the characters are not engaging, and at no point is excitement actually delivered on. I don't know what I was expecting from this book, but this certainly wasn't it. The book is very retro - written in the late '70s and taking place in the '60s - and I guess you could argue that it is a classic in a way. But it's very disappointing, especially for this reader.

Phrynne says

I may be one of the few people who never saw the movie but I really enjoyed the book! The author was really good at creating the atmosphere of Jakarta, the heat, the smells and the poverty of the local people. The story was fascinating, not just the politics of the day but also the life and interactions between the visiting Western journalists. Beautifully written and very interesting.

Mojokertoensis says

Ini adalah novel yang cukup baik menggambarkan masa-masa kelam sejarah Indonesia tersebut. Sebelumnya sangat jarang, hanya bisa dihitung dengan jari, sebuah roman yang menggambarkan masa-masa pemberontakan G 30 S/PKI tanpa adanya sponsor dari pemerintah. Untuk itu, novel ini terhitung berharga untuk bangsa Indonesia.

Indonesia disini dipandang dari kacamata orang asing. Pada masa itu, Indonesia sangat membenci orang asing dengan propaganda Soekarno yang anti Nekolim. Indonesia pada masa pemerintahan Soekarno pernah begitu tegas terhadap dunia. Malaysia diganyang. Amerika dan Inggris "Go to hell!". Keluar dari PBB. Peduli amat dengan blok barat dan timur, Soekarno membuat NEFO (New Emerging Forces).

Soekarno, telah diakui oleh siapapun, selalu membuat decak kagum, bahkan oleh musuh-musuhnya. Dia orator yang sangat ulung dan logis, yang membuat orang-orang tergerak hanya dengan mendengarkannya. Dia punya mimpi besar untuk Indonesia, untuk dunia. Namun seperti anak yang terlalu asyik bermain dengan mainannya, dia lupa menapak ke realitas. Realitasnya adalah rakyatnya miskin dan kekurangan makanan.

Soekarno, di mata orang yang tak pernah bisa memahaminya secara menyeluruh, adalah tiran dan pahlawan. Bahkan orang yang menganggap dia tiran pun mengakui bahwa Soekarno adalah pahlawan terbesar Indonesia. Soekarno selalu menarik untuk diperbincangkan, tak ada habis-habisnya membicarakan Soekarno. Bagaimana kecerdasannya yang melebihi rata-rata. Bagaimana percaya dirinya yang luar biasa. Bagaimana dia benar-benar di dalam hati mencintai petani (seperti Marhen) dan tukang becak. Bagaimana serunya petualangan seksualnya. Bagaimana dia berusaha membangun monumen-monumen untuk menunjukkan bahwa Indonesia adalah Superpower. Monumen Nasional konon dibangun menunjukkan mitos alat

kelaminnya berujung emas. Orang membenci sekaligus mencintainya setengah mati. Seperti jatuh cinta, kita jatuh cinta kepada Soekarno, tapi kemudian frustrasi oleh cinta itu sendiri. Seperti Billy Kwan dalam buku ini, yang obsesif terhadap Soekarno.

Buku ini benar-benar bukan novel biasa. Sangat kompleks sebagai thriller psikologis. Sangat detail sebagai roman sejarah. Sangat mencekam sebagai sebuah drama. Sebuah buku yang lengkap, Anda tak akan menyesal membacanya. Ini adalah buku yang penting untuk Indonesia.

Dari orang asing, kita mendapatkan gambaran mengenai sejarah negeri kita. Dari orang asing, kita mengenal stereotip bangsa kita, orang-orang berkulit coklat, dengan etika kerja yang terganggu oleh cuaca yang begitu panas, selalu merokok kretek yang baunya membuat mual, dan menggemari sate.

Ya itulah kita, bangsa Indonesia. Bangsa yang pernah membuat negara-negara besar malu. Bangsa yang kemudian menjadi bangsa yang malu akan dirinya sendiri.

Alvi Harahap says

Set in Indonesia during the Sukarno regime in 1965. Guy Hamilton is an Anglo-Australian journalist who arrives to Jakarta as a first time Australian ABC Radio correspondent. He will face one of the most important turmoils of the Indonesian history and will survive to tell his story... A most evocative book. So short, yet it weaves together stories of love, friendship, courage, and political drama. And it also shows love and friendship against the terrifying backdrop of major real-world events (Sukarno in Jakarta). And it does a beautiful job with Indonesian culture -- especially the meaning of the wayang puppet theater

David Winger says

Reading Patrick Holland's new novel got me thinking about Australian authors covering S E Asia and digging through my library for a book I almost forgot I had, and I started re-reading it. *The Year of Living Dangerous* is a masterpiece, and somehow, nearly forgotten here in Aus. For all the talk you get about the Asian Century and how dynamic life in and around the Australasian region has become, our literati sure do seem to like their distractionist (is that a word?) Historico-Euro fluff. Not that there's anything wrong with writing about Europe mind, but it doesn't have much to do with Australia and the neighbours. But forget politics. This is a novel about people, about culture and landscape and ... well, read it, you'll be glad you did.

CD says

Thirty years after I first read this, Koch's writing still evokes the same sensations and feeling it did originally. It is if I had only read it yesterday. The now long gone era of post colonialist fervor of Indonesia in the pre Suharto days of the Bung Karno (Sukarno's mad regime) is brought to life if only in the dreams of the characters and shadows of *wayang kulit* puppets to the sound of the gamelan music.

While the style of writing may be different than current fashion dictates, it is not dated and perhaps borders on ethereal overlaid by a first person perfect journalistic commentary.

The Year of Living Dangerously is the god-king Sukarno terminology for a stage of behavior of 'his' people to employ in their struggle with the rest of the world during 1965. Confrontation and other mad, as insane, phrases and reinvented words are bandied about in the politics of Indonesia in this moment in a revolutionary time. A small group of western journalists are on hand to watch and report the deterioration of society. The group includes an Australian half Chinese dwarf photo journalist whose intellectual fervor takes him along for the ride in to the depths of the beast of the fervor gripping the populace. The main protagonist, Guy Hamilton, another Aussie journalist becomes the victim of the many behind the scenes intrigues culminating in a final physical confrontation and punishment that foreshadowing hints at for a third or more of the book. If not morally deserving of the injury coming to him, he at the least, is another not innocent scapegoat. Contradictions abound in this world of unending darkness.

Set in the cultural and climatic density that is South Eastern Asia, The Year of Living Dangerously hints and overly rails at many virulent topics from racism, to poverty, to tyranny, to the cultural morass and depravity left from colonial times as the people afflicted choose a new social model. Blood, death, and chaos are never far behind the dancing shadow tales of a people entering into this world of Dangerous Living.

It is all Water from the Moon

Huda says

Immensely grateful to my friend who passed this book to me before I left for Indonesia. It was the perfect read while I covered some ground there, as measly as my trip was, I think the book took me even further than my legs could.

On the surface, The Year of Living Dangerously is light, even ridiculous at times. There is a scene where our protagonist Guy Hamilton is being pursued for friendship by Billy Kwan the dwarf cameraman, and goddamn if I didn't think the whole time that no one asks you to be friends anymore. Not even in the 50s, I don't believe they do. But crazy and off-kilter as it was, there was always an intensity to the story, and I valued that greatly especially in Billy Kwan.

Billy Kwan, who I regarded more as the protagonist rather than Guy Hamilton, was a severely under-appreciated character. As I read, Billy becomes more and more compelling. He was a creature of passion, he had heroes, he pinned his hopes on them and gave them everything he had in order to see a mutual dream realized. We know from the start that his heroes would betray him. Still, even with Billy's idealistic and almost childish point of view, he does so with utmost sincerity, and it is difficult to fault him for his beliefs. The only problem is his tendency to manipulate, coming as close to playing God, just because he had beliefs.

The Year of Living Dangerously was exhilarating and disturbing, the perfect match for all the dualities in the book.

P/S: There is a movie version of this, while casting is perfect (guess who plays Billy Kwan, go on Google it!) the story itself was tweaked in ways I didn't like. Other than that, it was a great picture for sixties Jakarta!

AC says

Nice book - I was expecting a political thriller, but the book was more character driven than I would have thought. I remember only vaguely the film -- so that helped... (the 'vaguely' part, that is...).

Electra says

J'avais vu le film enfant et son souvenir m'obsédait. Un livre très instructif sur l'Indonesie (et le film à revoir très vite)

Sharon Bakar says

Saw the film many years ago and it continues to haunt me. Picked up a third hand copy of the book, probably in Bras Basah road in Singapore way back, but it's sat on my TBR shelf for far too long. Am intrigued by this period in Indonesian history, and still filling in gaps in my own ignorance. This is an atmospheric political thriller that captures the last months of Sukarno's presidency as seen through the eyes of a group of - mainly Australian - journalists. It centres on Guy Hamilton, who is befriended by the dwarf photographer, Billy Kwan, soon after his arrival in Jakarta. Kwan spies on just about everyone and writes about them in his journal and compiles dossiers on them - most of all on Hamilton and his girlfriend, Jilly. Kwan's is the most complex character in the novel, yet I don't think we ever fully understand what drives him.

Sue says

Research for my own novel led me to this book on which the famous Mel Gibson movie is based. I loved the film so I knew I would like the story. What I didn't realise was how beautifully written it was, how true and compelling. It's an absolutely wonderful novel and I'm ashamed to say I knew nothing before about its author, Christopher J. Koch. What a writer. What a book.

Kim Fay says

First I will confess that "The Year of Living Dangerously" is my favorite movie. I watched the movie (probably half a dozen times) before I ever read the book years ago. I'm not sure what compelled me to pick it up again, but I'm so glad I did. While I love the movie for its atmosphere, I love the book for its insights into the politics of Indonesia in the early 1960s. That time period was so politically volatile, and it was completely overshadowed by the rapidly growing war in Vietnam. This book also helps the reader understand the Western mind set that led to the Vietnam War. The story of the complicated friendship between an Australian journalist and a Chinese-Australian photographer (I'm over-simplifying, but I don't want to give anything away) as Indonesia perches on the verge of a bloody civil war, this book is appealing for its variety of characters --- each a type (though not a stereotype) of person who finds himself far from where he is from, torn between cultures, unsure of where to call home after so many years adrift in foreign lands. I'm also impressed with the way Koch weaves spirituality with politics, tradition with progress, and

the conflicts of loyalties to one's nation and loyalties to one's self.

Joe Valdez says

The Year of Living Dangerously, the 1978 novel by C.J. Koch, is a towering disappointment as reading material. I say that as someone who loves the 1982 film based on Koch's book--a classic, end-of-summer romance of tremendous passion and sophistication starring Mel Gibson, Sigourney Weaver and in her Academy Award winning performance as a male Chinese-Australian dwarf, Linda Hunt--but who also has a particular distaste for passive narrators who observe characters through a telephoto lens. In Koch's book, the emotional stakes are distant, the passion and intensity fleeting and the information dumps sky high in what should have been a compelling narrative.

The story is the first person account of Cook, an Australian reporter in his late thirties who bares an awful resemblance to Koch and conveniently observes all. In the summer of 1965, Cook is posted in the sweltering Indonesian capitol of Jakarta, where populist strongman Sukarno placates his impoverished people with threats against the West and promises a return to glory. At the Wayang Bar, an oasis for the foreign press corps inside the air conditioned Hotel Indonesia, a Chinese-Australian dwarf and freelance photographer named Billy Kwan introduces himself to Guy Hamilton, the newly arrived correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Service.

Kwan recognizes in Hamilton dashing good looks and naked ambition, as well as the newsman's existential problem. The ABS correspondent Hamilton has been sent to replace left Indonesia without showing Hamilton the ropes or sharing what contacts he had. Kwan takes Hamilton outside the hotel compound for a stroll through the slums, exposing him to the poverty and degradation of the people, voicing support for the overtures Sukarno is making to improve their living conditions. The next morning, Kwan proposes a partnership--Hamilton for the words, Billy for the pictures--and offers to help him build contacts in both Sukarno's government and in the Communist insurgency, the PKI.

Hamilton ashed his cigar, and studied the end of it for some moments without speaking. He began now to entertain a suspicion which was to be the subject of a number of discussions in the Wayang Bar: that Kwan was involved with the PKI, and was perhaps a Communist Party member. This might cause trouble in the future; but he decided not to question his good luck.

"If this works out," he said finally, "I'll make a deal with you. I'll give you all the film you can handle from now on; I'll use no one else, and you won't need to scratch for work again. There's just one condition. You check in with me every day before you take any other assignments--and if you have any more contacts like this, you give them to me. Okay?"

Kwan blinked twice, then broke into a broad grin. "Fine," he said. "That's what I've always wanted--a real partnership. You're a hard bugger, but I think you and I will get on, Guy." He jerked in his chair. "You'll get an interview that'll make an international stir. It'll get things rattling on the diplomatic circuit here, I can tell you. An interview like this needs a good instrument to transmit it." His chin lifted, and his face wore a new expression: one of almost fatuous pride. "I've chosen a good instrument," he said.

At the pool behind the hotel, Kwan introduces Hamilton to Jill Bryant, a secretary at the British Embassy who works for Col. Ralph Henderson, British Military Attache. One of the few single white women in Jakarta, Jill is heavily pursued but wary of involvement with another man after her affair with a French

diplomat ended badly. Her friendship with Billy serves to keep suitors away, but having met with the cameraman's approval, Hamilton gets the impression that Billy is conspiring to get him together with Jill. He wins points with Billy by deliberately losing a swimming race against the Colonel when he sees how bad the elder Brit wants to win.

The top foreign newsmen--a British fop named Wally O'Sullivan and a crass Canadian correspondent named Pete Curtis--have to concede that Hamilton has usurped them with his scoops. While Curtis makes no secret of his taste for the Javanese prostitutes who sell themselves outside the cemetery after dark, Cook carries the secret of Wally's sex life: a proclivity for young men. Cook's confidence with Hamilton reveals no sexual perversions, only a blind pursuit for something big on the horizon. Hamilton is assisted in his work by an Indonesian named Kumar who the newsman is generous toward and respectful of, but begins to suspect is affiliated with the PKI.

Once Hamilton and Jill become lovers--with Billy's blessing and even encouragement to use his garden bungalow for privacy, which Guy is given a key to--the photographer's behavior grows erratic. Jakarta is edging closer to civil war. Jill dispels Hamilton's suspicion of her long hours working with the Colonel by revealing that the Chinese have floated an arms shipment to the PKI. Hamilton refuses to promise he won't use this bombshell in his reports, estranging himself both from his lover and from his partner. Billy grows increasingly disillusioned with President Sukarno as well and begins to assume all the characteristics of an assassin.

Having gone to earth, Billy Kwan preoccupied us in the Wayang more than he had done when he was visible. Perhaps it was a symptom of our own general exhaustion and malaise. Even Henri Bouchard and Kevin Condon discussed him to an extent they would not normally have done. Wally's expulsion, and Kwan's suspected part in it, made some post-mortems inevitable, but they continued to a morbid extent: we were like voyagers on a cruise that had gone on too long. And outrage became replaced by a black amusement.

The Year of Living Dangerously has some vivid writing in it. Its strength is the eloquence in which Koch describes the atmosphere of Jakarta and how it serves as a pressure cooker for his characters. Koch, a radio producer for the Australian Broadcasting Service in Sydney for many years before he became a full-time writer, based much of Guy Hamilton on his younger brother Philip, who covered Sukarno's downfall and signed his broadcasts off in much the same manner as Hamilton does. Hamilton, a prince, and Billy, a dwarf who serves the prince, would appear to have a dynamic relationship, juxtaposed nicely against the lore of the *wayang kulit*, the Indonesian shadow puppet theater..

The critical flaw in the novel is the use of the author surrogate "Cook" to tell the reader everything. We are told about Sukarno. We are told about Javanese culture. We are told what Jill Bryant looks like, exhaustively. We are told what characters are thinking and what they uttered in private conversations with each other, even though "Cook" would have no insight into most of these details. Some of his information is vital to the story but very little of it revealed through the actions of the characters, which are Hamilton and Billy. Guy & Jill's romance is largely absentee here, communicated to the reader with all the excitement of a letter a mother might write you while you were at summer camp.

The novel goes off the rails when Koch drops Billy from the story and follows Hamilton on holiday to Tugu, where Kumar arranges a rendezvous with a Russian spy who wants the itinerary of the Chinese arms shipment and is prepared to seduce Guy to get it. This transaction was dropped from the Australian-American production directed by Peter Weir and adapted by C.J. Koch and Peter Weir & David Williamson, which focuses on "A Love Caught In The Fire Of Revolution." Hunt's award-winning performance as Billy Kwan gives the character a gentle nature not evident in the book, where Billy is often depicted as an exotic

creep a la Peter Lorre.

Rebecca McNutt says

Such a sad yet powerfully moving story; set in the 1960's, this book is fast-paced, riveting, unforgettable and definitely a classic. If you haven't seen the film, it's one of the best. The story of a rookie journalist caught up in the growing turmoil of Indonesia, followed by his wise but disgruntled cameraman (a dwarf named Billy Kwan), *The Year of Living Dangerously* is a book deep with history, friendship, romance and horrible frustration for a country on the brink of true horror. As unfortunately was the case, Indonesia was hit by a terrible genocide in the 1960's in real-life. This book doesn't really discuss that, but for any history buffs reading it, you'll have it in the back of your mind knowing all too well what's to come.
