

# Love could have won

When award-winning writer Isa Kamari was doing research for his novel about Maria Hertogh, he found out something surprising: Maria's two mothers had a lot in common. Could their love for Maria have made the riots avoidable? If only ...

An architect by day and writer by night, Isa Kamari is often inspired to write about issues of racial and religious conflict. One of his novels is *Nadra*. Originally published in Malay as *Atas Nama Cinta*, it is a retelling of the story of Maria Hertogh. The English title, of course, refers to the name she used while she lived with Aminah Mohamed, her adoptive mother.

Reading the novel is quite different from reading a history book. Mr Isa has brought these historical characters to life, allowing us to feel the love, the pain of separation and the confusion they must have experienced.

His research also revealed how complex the situation was in real life. I had always assumed that Maria had come from a rich and powerful family, since Indonesia was ruled by Dutch colonists before World War II.

The reality was that the war made life hard for many families, regardless of whether they were Dutch or local. Maria's birth mother, Adeline Hertogh, had been left alone with her children during the war, and may not have had enough money at that time. Remember, in 1943, she had to borrow a bicycle to travel to Bandung in order to bring Maria home.

Cik Aminah was not a poor Indonesian villager, either. She was quite a modern, **cosmopolitan** woman. She had lived with her first husband in Japan, and worked as a



JUSTIN ZHUANG

Writer Isa Kamari outside the Supreme Court, where the Maria Hertogh riots first broke out on 11 December 1950.

Japanese language translator during the war. She had even adopted a Japanese orphan girl, whom she had named Kamariah. Then, Cik Aminah, as a widow, remarried and settled in

Indonesia. That was when she became friends with Mrs Hertogh. She had helped Mrs Hertogh take care of her children previously as well.

I was surprised by these facts. They suggested that Mrs Hertogh and Cik Aminah were roughly equal in status, and probably had a lot in common.

When I asked Mr Isa what surprised him the most in his research, he answered that it was their love for Maria. In spite of all their difficulties, Maria and Cik Aminah refused to be separated from one another. If only Mrs Hertogh and Cik Aminah had come together, he says, they could have shared their love for Nadra, and the violence would not have happened.

Mr Isa's wishful thinking might seem too simple a solution. Yet ultimately, this is one of the central lessons of the story of Maria Hertogh: we must let love bring us together, not tear us apart.

— By NG YI-SHENG

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#### VOCAB BUILDER

**cosmopolitan** (say "kos-mo-po-li-ten"; adjective) = having lived in many parts of the world.

**tolerance** (say "to-le-rens"; noun) = willingness to accept different beliefs.

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#### Q&A WITH ISA KAMARI

##### What inspired you to write Nadra?

I decided to write about the riots because there are a lot of important lessons on racial harmony and **tolerance** that we can learn from the tragedy. There are also a lot of interesting episodes of love and friendship in the story. For example, during the Japanese Occupation of Bandung, Adeline's children hid from the Japanese soldiers at Aminah's house. Aminah also supplied food to the Dutch families during difficult times.

##### Could you tell us about the process of researching for and writing the book?

I read books and monographs on the subject. I also interviewed some people from the older generation who witnessed or had memories of family members who experienced the riots.

##### What has the response to Nadra been like?

The Malay version has been well received. Readers in Malaysia and Indonesia especially find it interesting. Many do not know or have forgotten about the story.

We have come to the end of the Maria Hertogh Riots series. The ten stories in the series offer many lessons we can take away from the saga surrounding Singapore's first riots. You can find the full series at our website, [www.more.whatsup.sg](http://www.more.whatsup.sg).