

AITo Update, August 2020: One Primate Family

Some of you may remember: back in 2015, the head primary school teacher in one of AITo's Indonesian partner villages, *Pak Adolof Rajah*, asked for books. "Our kids learn the skill of reading through the school textbooks," he said, "But then they have nothing to read." The AITo community responded—since then, more than 230 top-quality illustrated children's books (most of them in English) have been selected, purchased, translated, and delivered to the K-6th graders at Tanah Merah's primary school. It's a small school—usually a total of 18-30 kids each year—but though poor in resources it is rich in attention, with several excellent teachers and parents who value their children's education.



In the teachers' room, Tanah Merah's Head of School gladly receives another batch of books from AITo. Photo: Cliff Rice

Earlier this year, just before Covid-19 hit the region, the AITo team delivered another set of books (thanks for your donations!) to the students of Tanah Merah, and we were curious to hear from the kids what they thought about the previous ones. So, with all the kids assembled in one classroom, the teachers led us in for a chat.

The kids were crowded into the front of the room, three and four to a desk, boys on one side and girls on the other. Many of these kids are ones we know fairly well; we have worked with their families since before they were born, and

watched them grow up. They see us regularly in the village; they play with our staff and visitors when Festival comes every two years. They tag along when we hike up to the forest nearby.

Nevertheless they were bashful. When we started asking questions, no one wanted to speak up to respond. So the ice was broken with a few simple questions that they could answer all at once, as a group: "Do you like, or don't you like, to read?" "LIKE!" They shouted in unison. Despite the kids' individual reticence, there was great energy in the room.

"What's your favorite book?" Shy smiles, but silence. Squirming in the seats. "What animals did you read about? What characters did you meet?"

Finally, Agil, age 10, perching on the edge of his chair, gave a mighty fidget. Though shy, it was clear he had something to say. His teacher spoke a few words of encouragement and he stood up.

Quietly, but flawlessly, word for word, out of Agil's mouth poured the entire text (in Indonesian translation) of the book *One Gorilla* by Anthony Browne. It's a simple counting book in which the numbers one to ten are represented by different species of primates (several of which, as it happens, are found in Indonesia). There are marvelous, detailed illustrations for each species. "One gorilla. Two orangutans... Six gibbons...Ten lemurs." The boy went on to recite the entire book. When he finished, the whole room erupted in cheers as Agil sat down, a huge shy grin of triumph on his face.

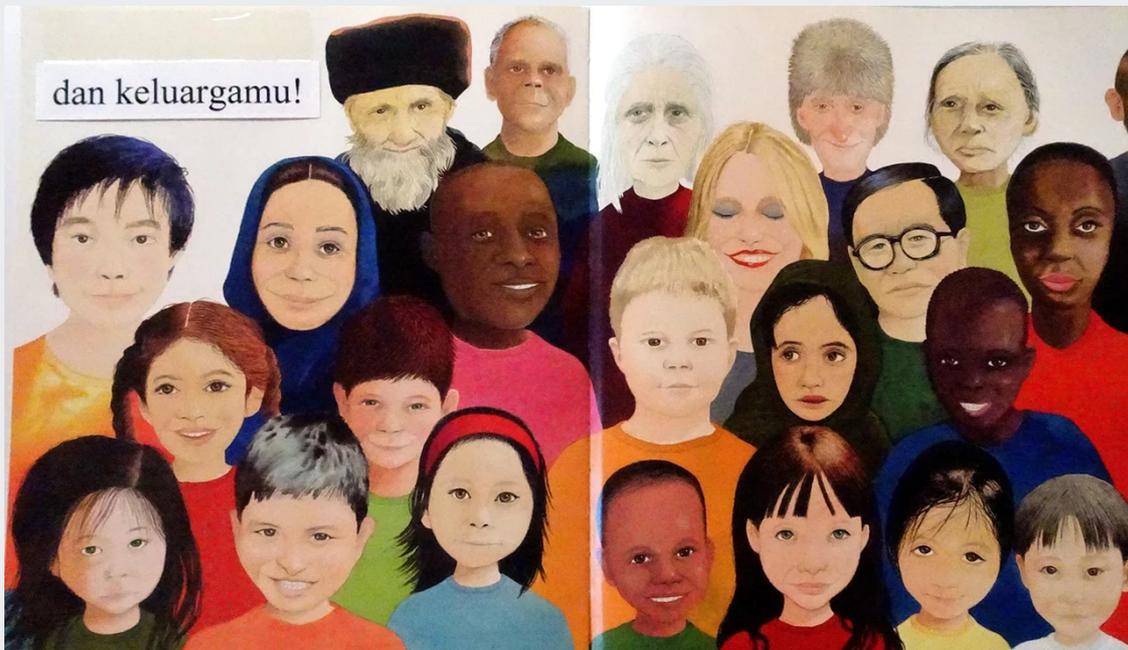
Then from the side of the room another young boy, Yosep, perked up. "What's your favorite book, Yosep?" But Yosep was even more hesitant to speak due to a speech impediment, which made his whispery-soft voice even quieter. Crouching down close to him, one word came out clearly: "Max." Ah, *Where the Wild Things Are!* By Maurice Sendak, in which a boy named Max becomes the king of the Wild Things, presides over a Wild Rumpus, and then sails gratefully back to his home, his family, and his supper. Yes, that was Yosep's absolute favorite.



Shy, but coaxable, 7-year-old Kris (on left) recited an entire book from memory. Photo: Cliff Rice

But we weren't done. As the teachers coaxed, "Come on, don't be shy! Tell them about your favorite book!" boys slumped in their desks and girls hid their faces and giggled. Finally, Kris, seven years old and in first grade, took a deep breath and stood up.

Like her much older schoolmate, Agil, Kris had memorized *One Gorilla*. Now was her moment to show what she'd mastered. "One gorilla. Two orangutans. Three chimpanzees..." Kris' voice was tiny, but very clear and, once she got going, completely without hesitation. "Eight macaques..." The room was still as she recited, from memory, the entire book. She got to the end: "... All primates. All one family. All my family.. and yours!" Once again, the whole room cheered, and Kris' seatmates hugged her, all with shy, sweet grins, as she sat back down.



"All primates. All one family. All my family...and yours!"

One Gorilla by Anthony Browne

Your support, and the connections made through the AITo partnership, have put books like *One Gorilla* in the hands of kids like Kris. She chose to commit to memory its message about our one primate family. Maybe the book helped her learn to count. Maybe it helped her learn to read. On this day, it certainly helped her shine.



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