



## A Journal Focused On East and Southeast Asia: Graham Lawrence On *Eastlit*

### ***Interview with Graham Lawrence – Editor of Eastlit***

*Eastlit was founded in 2012 by Graham with his friend Bryn and has since become the literary home for both the East and Southeast Asian local writers it supports and the foreign and expat writers inspired by these regions. The team at Eastlit recognises the importance of this emerging region, the move to improve English throughout it, and hopes to be a small part of this change. Eastlit aims to further promote the development of English literature and creative writing throughout the area. Up until now there has been little support for English based literature in the region except in a few small quarters. This is going to change rapidly as the region itself is changing in other ways. The stories, old and new, of East and South East Asia are going to become accessible across the world in the coming years as English literature from these countries takes its place alongside the writing from more traditional literary areas. These pieces will add to and broaden an already wide set of literary genres and works as the writers of East and South East Asia assume their roles within the realm of the English written word.*

*As a well-travelled Brit, occasional "amateur writer", and eclectic reader, Graham recognises the importance of discarding personal tastes to publish all good writing. This year he launched Southlit, Eastlit's new sister journal to incorporate South and Southwest Asian work. The first issue of Southlit was released in July, 2014.*

### ***Interview by Zara Adcock***

#### **What inspired you to start *Eastlit*? and as an online journal? What have you learnt/gained from the experience so far?**

Well it was started by Bryn and me although Bryn has since withdrawn. The main motivation was that there did not seem to be a journal that focused purely on the combined regions of East Asia and Southeast Asia. Between us we had both spent many years in these two regions. We were also both amateur writers and spent a lot of time talking about writing and novels. *Eastlit* kind of took off from there when one day I was looking at available website domain names and saw *Eastlit*. Without thinking I said to Bryn, "Hey, what do you think of *Eastlit* for a journal name?" He replied, "Get it". And so on October 26, 2012 the project started.

The reason that is purely online is that we basically didn't have any money. It is a funny thing but the online phenomenon, while maybe not to everyone's taste, has been liberating in offering opportunity where it did not before. There is no way that we could have launched a print journal.

The experience so far has been that there are plenty of really great people out there trying to write and get published, and it is really nice to be part of that. The writers are the talents and I guess I merely put things together. These days the editorial board selects what gets published and what doesn't.

Two phrases I agree with, are frequently used to describe *Eastlit*; one, “always evolving” and two, “unique dedication to promoting the work of its contributors”. One thing I personally love about *Eastlit* is the lack of restrictions on what work you may submit. As long as submissions fit the “from/or connected to East or Southeast Asia” criteria the work simply has to be good regardless of form, style, topic, and genre (with the exception of erotica) – thus opening *Eastlit* up to a wide range of refreshing possibilities. But enough about why I love *Eastlit*, what do you think makes *Eastlit* special? What do you feel sets *Eastlit* apart from other literary journals, especially digital ones?

One thing that affects a lot is that we are a monthly publication. That means that we have to make decisions quickly. Because of this we have a lot of contact with our contributors and many say that we are quicker to reply than other journals.

Another aspect is that being monthly seems to mean we publish more first-timers especially non-native local writers. I have also tried to stress to editorial board members that if they like a piece of work, vote yes for publication. The work does not have to meet any technical requirement. Our board also has people from a wide range of backgrounds and experience too and is not all MFA characters (although we have some). So maybe it represents your average reader more.

We are also an amateur run and totally independent journal. *Eastlit* receives no money from anyone beyond very occasional small donations and is not connected to any university or group. I am not sure why but some of our contributors refer to other journals as run by the “university people.” I am not sure if that is meant as a negative or positive comment about *Eastlit* or about other journals, but it is a niche of sorts that I am happy enough with.

**Can you tell us about the inner workings of *Eastlit*? My understanding is that a diverse group of people run the project. How does this work, and what is it like? What are the freedoms/limitations to this?**

Except for our readers and contributors, who are probably the most important part, there are around four groups: me, my advisory group, the editorial board, and a regular columnist.

I am the owner, founder, chief editor, general dogsbody and all of those kinds of things. The advisory group give me advice on things like look, legal issues and other practical considerations. They also consider work submitted by editorial board members, and any submitted editorials.

The editorial board consists of a couple or sometimes groups of people who look at either poetry or non-poetry submissions. Each member has a single vote and for a piece to get published it needs more yes than no votes. There is no discussion in smoke filled rooms. As we publish every month, this system works well.

We used to have two columnists: Steve Rosse and Stefanie Field. Steve wrote the *How Not to Write* advisory series which has now come to an end, and so we are down to Stefanie only who writes the book review column, *Bookworm in Bangkok*.

The limitation in everything at *Eastlit* is time and money. The freedom is that we can very easily adapt to something new. The actual system is quite simple from submissions to publication or rejection although it can be a little crazy at times.

**As EASTLIT continues to grow, I am curious to know more about EASTLIT's readers. Who are they, and what does EASTLIT provide to readers who have no connection/knowledge of the region?**

If I look at our analytics, and I do this a few times a month, the places where we have the most readers are scattered around the world. In East Asia we are well read in China and Japan and less so in Korea. In South East Asia we have a lot of readers in Thailand and the Philippines, and are well-read throughout the area except for in Indonesia. In recent months we have seen a lot of growth in Vietnam. Outside of our regions we have big readerships in the US, Canada, UK, India and Australia with some niches in other parts of Europe too. As we have not done any surveys, we do not really know much more about our readership!

Hopefully, we expose those outside the area to some varied and interesting writing, poetry, and occasionally artwork focused on East and South East Asia, and develop interest for the literature and art of the regions.

**As an editor, and an English teacher, what are your philosophies on good writing and writing well?**

I am a strong believer in saying what you want or expressing yourself. I believe that how you use words, form, or grammar is secondary to that unless the use of these is a specific part of your expression. A person's art whether it be painting, sculpture, poetry, or fiction is their expression and how they choose to express or show that is part of the art. No art actually has an intrinsic value, so I do not see that a piece of writing can be good or well written in a general way. What the audience, the readers, think is what makes it good or bad, and that varies from reader to reader. That is the beauty of all art including writing. It means different things and has different values to different people.

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