

# NOVELISTS IN PROGRESS: Writing Long Filipino Fiction in English

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Let me begin by announcing a slight change in the title of this brief talk. I know that there's nothing more annoying than getting on a boat and being told you're going somewhere other than your published destination, but this won't be as extreme as that. Instead of talking about "novels in progress," I'll devote my time to what I belatedly realized was my real subject, which is "novelists in progress"—that is, how we Filipinos (or at least a few of us) are just learning and struggling to become novelists—again—and achieving, however arduously, some measure of success.

I'm not going to repeat what Prof. Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo has already done very well in her lecture on "Fabulists and Chroniclers," a overview of the main concerns and characteristics of the contemporary Filipino novel in English. Rather, I'll speak about the writing of that novel from a practitioner's point of view, drawing both on my own and my peers' experiences. Those experiences can be pretty varied.

Charlson Ong wrote his first novel, one with the self-fulfilling title of *An Embarrassment of Riches*, for the million-peso Centennial Prize in 1998, on the interest of which he continues to live and support a karaoke habit; his second novel, *Banyaga*, began as a screenplay. "It wasn't sold," Charlson told me, "so I novelized it."

Dean Alfar wrote the first draft of the prizewinning *Salamanca* in 30 days in November 2004. He had to, because he was taking part in “National Novel Writing Month” or NaNoWriMo, an Internet-based project that aims to produce what it calls “The Great Frantic Novel” within, yes, a month.

Vince Groyon was urged by Edith Tiempo after the Silliman Workshop to write a novel, and his masteral thesis requirements gave him the final push to write *The Sky Over Dimas*. “By that time,” he says, “in my head the novel had become a kind of acid test for fiction writers. I felt that I couldn’t really call myself a fiction writer unless I had written one (no offense to short story masters).”

As for myself, I wrote my first novel, *Killing Time in a Warm Place*, as part of my creative dissertation project in 1991. I began *Soledad’s Sister* in 1999 for my David TK Wong fellowship in England, but finished it only last year—or, at least, a first publishable version of it, which we are happily launching today.

Because of *Soledad’s Sister*, I have begun to be described as a novelist—something that still makes me cringe. Two novels do not a novelist make; but more importantly, I think, the term “novelist” implies or demands a certain outlook on life, a certain scope of artistic vision that I have yet to find and feel comfortable with. Indeed, with the notable exceptions of F. Sionil Jose, Antonio Enriquez, and Azucena Grajo-Uranza, it seems that few Filipinos living here today can be rightfully called novelists, in the sense that their novels are what they are mainly known for. Edith Tiempo has written novels, but is appreciated more for her poetry. (Of course, in America, we have people like Linda Ty Casper, Ninotchka Rosca, Jessica Hagedorn, Eric Gamalinda, Gina Apostol, and Cecilia Manguerra Brainard—but their situation is friendlier to the aspiring or practicing novelist.)

Some Filipinos have written and published two novels—Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, Alfred Yuson, Charlson Ong, and now myself among them—but I’m very sure that any one of those mentioned would prefer to be called a “fictionist” than a novelist—not only because the term suggests a broader range of things, but also because I suspect that it releases us from the burden of a Toni

Morrison or a J. M. Coetzee, who will forever be asked about their next novels.

Incidentally, the word “fictionist” is something we Filipinos use almost exclusively. It’s in the 1913 Webster’s as “a writer of fiction”, but strangely enough the Americans and the British hardly ever use it; the Croatians and Brazilians sometimes do. If you Google the word, the first three people who have their names appended to the word are Filipinos or of Filipino descent: the Turkish Cypriot writer Crista Ermiya, the poet-rock musician Vicente-Ignacio Soria de Veyra, and the Cebu-based writer Erma Cuizon. So we might as well have invented “fictionist” for ourselves, being its prime users.

“Fictionist” is also a more modest and more realistic description, because we are not a novel-writing people, and the figures show it. In her pioneering study of book publishing in the Philippines, Patricia May Jurilla reports that between 1985 and 2000, we published only 47 novels in English (vs. 60 in Filipino, of which most were translations or new editions)—an average of about three new novels a year. Earlier than that, she tracked 11 novels in English throughout the 1960s, and only six during the 1970s (most likely because of the restraints on publishing under martial law).

The 2008 UP Gawad Likhaan Centennial Literary Contest attracted 15 entries for the novel in English, about the same as the number of entries for this year’s Palanca in that same category (and there was, surely, some overlap). The Hong Kong-based Man Asian Literary Prize, now on its second year, reportedly attracted 25 entries from the Philippines this year, more than double last year’s 10 entries—but the figure could be deceptive, because the Man Asian accepts excerpts from novels yet to be completed, and surely again many of these same novels were submitted as well to the UP Gawad Likhaan and the Palancas. (On a happy note, four Filipinos made it to this year’s Man Asian long list: Ian Casocot, Lakambini Sitoy, Miguel Syjuco, and Alfred Yuson.)

By comparison, the Indians seem to produce novelists next to motorcycles; I have no firm figures at hand, but they dominated the Man Asian this year and last; in last year’s long list of 23, no less