

A Small Wind: Novels for Filipino Children

Carla M. Pacis

Over the last three years, a small wind has appeared over the horizon that is children's publishing. Hopefully, it will grow into a typhoon that will sweep the country off its feet. This wind is the novel written for Filipino children.

These novels are not the first but are those that have appeared after a long period of drought. They have come tumbling one after the other, have a very strong Filipino flavor and have addressed the Filipino pre-teen and teenager, an audience that has been long neglected by Filipino publishers till now.

In 1997, Giraffe Books published Joel Toledo's *Pedro and the Lifeforce*, a novel about a boy's search for the magic crystal that would not only bring an end to the severe drought that has visited a small barrio but will also save his younger brother from sure death. The theme of this piece is universal, much like the search for the Holy Grail—a quest for a higher good. Very evident is Toledo's childhood influences—the Arthurian stories filled with knights, damsels and druids coupled with the language of chivalry: “The *kapre* broke into booming laughter. Then it said, “Forgive me, Lumbo—but the bearer is only a child!” Its shoulders shook with another chuckle. “Mock him not, fellow Chosen,” Lumbo's reply was quick. “I have been enslaved by this . . . child.”

These influences from Western tradition cannot be avoided seeing as they abound in the literature in English available to Filipino children. But it is here where the novels' similarity to Western works ends.

Toledo's setting is a small *barrio* populated by people who not only believe in God but in the other beings that rule the land, water

and air—beings who exist only in the Filipino psyche—the *tikbalang*, *kapre*, *nuno sa punso*, *engkantos*, *dwendes*, and *sirenas*. They provide the fantasy element that appeal to children and Toledo's story moves seamlessly from the realistic to the fantastic in the same way most Filipinos live with these beliefs. However, his main character Pedro denies the old traditions and beliefs only to embrace them again.

An interesting premise of the novel is that Pedro has to fight the very same beings he is supposed to save. Is this not what self-realization is all about—having to fight our own personal demons? The quest for self-realization is a strategy many novelists for young adults use to unravel the many issues that confront youth. It also answers the readers' need for a fast-paced, action packed text that provides a final, satisfying resolution.

Pedro's search for his father, who had died a seemingly useless death while the boys were very young, is a theme from myth that is also used frequently in novels for young adults. It comes in other forms such as an uneasy parental relationship, for at this age, children see adults, most especially parents, as adversaries rather than nurturers or friends.

In 1998, Cacho Publishing published two novels for children: *The Secret* by Lin Acacio-Flores and *Owl Friends* by Carla M. Pacis. In contrast to Toledo's novel, both are realistic novels set in different periods and circumstances in Philippine history.

The Secret is based on the author's personal experiences during the last world war. The character of Sister Angela was patterned after a favorite nun in school. The convent school is also based on Acacio-Flores' own. The actual "mystery" was built on a common occurrence during the war.

To write about a historical period for an audience that is so far removed from the experience is tricky. But in this case, the author has succeeded brilliantly. She uses a device that writers of children mine endlessly, but not always successfully: mystery and suspense. She uses the first page to effectively draw the children into the story. She builds up the suspense slowly until the children have no recourse but to continue reading and see the story through. The title of Chapter 1 is "Whispers" and the first paragraph begins with the following

sentences: “The unease started when a messenger came in the middle of the Mass and whispered something in Sister Angela’s ear. There was a faint rustling of the nun’s starched veils and skirts. And then the nuns whispering to one another. There they were, seated in neat rows at the front, near the silver altar.”

What child would not want to know what the whispers were about?

Helping to build this suspense is the convent school setting that looms throughout the story. Anyone familiar with the schools built before the war will know of the cold, dark corridors and forbidden areas, mostly to preserve the religious’ privacy.

To bring the child reader closer to the experience and to give the novel its authenticity, Acacio–Flores used actual headlines, researched and found at the Lopez Library.

Headlines from The Tribune, Manila, Philippines, Tuesday,
December 9, 1941:
U.S. DECLARES WAR ON JAPAN
NICHOLS FIELD RAIDED!
ATTACK 7 P. I. POINTS IN FIRST DAY OF WAR
DAVAO BOMBED TWICE, BAGUIO, 2 CAGAYAN
TOWNS ONCE

The news was also used to provide the time line. Just as the start of the war is declared in a headline, the end is announced in a paragraph from an editorial:

In October 1944 the greatest sea fight in history—perhaps the world’s last great fleet action—broke the naval power of Japan and spelled the beginning of the end of the war in the Pacific. The Battle for Leyte Gulf fought off the Philippine Archipelago, sprawled across an area of almost 500,000 square miles, about twice the size of Texas. Unlike most of the action of World War II, it included every element of naval power from submarines to planes . . .

After Leyte Gulf, the Japanese Fleet was finished . . .

Hanson W. Baldwin
(Former Military Editor of the *New York Times*)

Because this novel was explicitly written for children, the author deliberately avoided writing about the Japanese atrocities committed in this time of our history. But she does give hints of how terrified people were of them and why—including having her heroine, Rica, experience it first hand. Behind the main mystery plot is the other story of how Rica's family coped with the war. Her family is uprooted and her father leaves them to join the guerillas. At war's end, her father comes back from the hills to rejoin his family.

Despite the drizzle of ash and the constant television and newspaper bombardment of Mt. Pinatubo's explosion and the aftermath, the experience was still far removed from those not directly involved, more so for those children born after the explosion. *Owl Friends* is a novel that came about from impressions that remain deep after a visit to two resettlement areas in Zambales while in residency at Casa San Miguel in San Antonio in 1995, four years after the explosion. These impressions were first translated into a short story that later evolved into a novel, thanks to a workshop on writing the novel for children sponsored by the PBBY. I had never written a novel before and the attempt to stretch a short story into a novel was difficult. But there are stories that choose their own forms as this one did. To begin with, I had previously set up several obstacles—the beginning, the middle, and the ending. Fortunately, I had all the necessary material. The Aetas (and others) I had interviewed had given me not a few notebook pages of information that I could use for this novel. All I needed to do was put it together. The chapters were a great help in providing the initial outline and allowed me several points of view—that of Johnny, the Aeta boy, Amelia, the lowland girl, Tatang Mayumoy, Johnny's grandfather, and Amelia's parents. They also allowed me to plunge into different settings and situations, all of which eventually tied the novel together.

If the first novel used the quest to move its plot, the second, mystery and suspense, this last one used its theme to do so. Friendship is a theme that is often utilized in stories for children specially those for young adults as it is something they value greatly. In contrast, the sub-theme of prejudice provided the perfect opportunity to set forth the innate qualities of the Aetas.

There is an uneasy truce that exists between the people of the lowlands and the Aetas in the resettlement area, a place they are all

forced to live in after Mount Pinatubo's explosion. But two children, Johnny, an Aeta and Amelia, a lowlander, became friends. Thanks to a small owl which sleeps under the Aeta boy's frizzy hair. Amelia's parents are horrified that their daughter's best friend is an Aeta boy. When their younger son, Julian, falls deathly sick and there is no one in the temporary village to help them, it is Johnny's Tatang Mayumoy, an old Aeta steeped in the knowledge of herbal medicine, who cures the sick child. Only then do they change their attitude towards a tribe that existed long before the arrival of the Spaniards.

There is expectation in the air. It sizzles in excitement. We look forward to the challenge this small wind brings.

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