



INTERVIEW WITH F. SIONIL JOSE

Charlson Ong

NATIONAL ARTIST FOR LITERATURE FRANCISCO SIONIL Jose was born on Dec.3, 1924 in Barrio Cabuwagan, Rosales, Pangasinan. Despite a childhood of poverty and landlessness Jose went to public schools and later, the University of Sto. Tomas where he studied Journalism. Perhaps, the best known Filipino author, internationally, Jose has published several short story collections, and some twelve novels including his Rosales saga- Poon, The Pretenders; My Brother, My Executioner; Mass; and Tree – which trace the journey of an Ilocano peasant family, through several generations, from landlessness to engagement with the centers of power. Jose has been translated into 28 languages. He has received several awards including the Ramon Magasaysay Award for Creative Communications and the 2004 Pablo Neruda Centennial Award from Chile. Likhaan caught up with him at the Solidarity book shop which Jose founded in 1965 along with the Solidaridad publishing house.

LIKHAAN: Of all your works what would you consider your masterpiece?

F. SIONIL JOSE: That's like asking who among my seven children I love most. All of them . . . no favorites.

LIKHAAN: Is there one work that you think is representative of you as a writer?

FSJ: No. Some of my novels were written on the run. I wrote different parts at different times and put them together later on, like carpentry. But what I enjoyed most writing was *Mass* because I wrote it from beginning to end in one creative spurt.

LIKHAAN: How long did it take you?

FSJ: One month in Paris. June, 1976.

LIKHAAN: Was it a pleasant book to write?

FSJ: O, yes. I conceived it on the plane to Paris and the moment I got into my room I took out my typewriter and started writing. I wrote it sometimes two or three days straight on end. No sleep, and sometimes no food, as well. Until sometimes my fingers got numb typing.

And when I was through with it, I made corrections, refined the characters, finalized the whole text.

LIKHAAN: What was the most unpleasant book to write?

FSJ: The novel about Ricarte (Vibora). I started with the thought that he was a tragic figure: A heroic old man who came back to this country after almost 30 years of exile in Japan. But as I went on studying him, researching, gathering data, I lost interest in the character. I did not put everything that I discovered about him in the novel.

LIKHAAN: Were you disappointed?

FSJ: A little bit. I interviewed a lot of people including some of the Japanese survivors of World War II who were with him in Ifugao. Two Japanese scholars helped me locate these people. They told me a lot of stories and I realized how Ricarte was devoted to Filipinas. He really loved this country, but towards the end, it turned out to be a kind of bizarre affection for Filipinas. There was a lot of information that I did not use because they would make him look worse than I imagined. For instance, he was so obsessed with undoing the past that he even wanted to rename the islands and the days of the week. And this is when nationalism can also be distorted. In the end, he was more of a tragic figure rather than a

tragic hero. But he had one saving grace and that was the fact that even with the power he enjoyed under the Japanese, he did not enrich himself. He reminded me so much of what Anding Roces said: patriots don't get rich. He was able to help a lot of people but also was responsible for setting up the Makapili (Band of Filipino wartime informers). He also blinded himself to the barbaric nature of the Japanese military. He returned in January 1942 by plane from Formosa, landed in Northern Luzon and came down to Manila. By April, the Bataan death march and all the atrocities that the Japanese committed were already known to most Filipinos. Yet he decided to go with the Japanese so that towards the end, he was quite scared of the guerrillas. That's why he joined the Japanese retreat to the Cordilleras. He was so mesmerized by them. And yet, they did not really give him a luxurious life. In Japan he lived poorly. He was aware of the negative characteristics of the Japanese but he was so enamored of their militarism, their sense of discipline that he stuck with them to the very end. By April 1942 when it was so obvious that the Japanese were barbaric, he could have just left them and returned to the Ilocos. He would have not starved, he was very much respected there.

LIKHAAN: Are your characters like Ka Lucio (Mass) based on real people?

FSJ: Yes. Ka Lucio is based on Luis Taruc. If you read my novels carefully you will recognize some of the characters because while it is true that they are composite characters ...it's very clear who I'm referring to.

LIKHAAN: The poet and critic Ricaredo Demetillo once said that you spoke of "awful truths and grappled with fearful realities that centrally confront us," are you always concerned with the dark side of society?

FSJ: If we are not concerned with the dark side of society, what do we write of? All sunshine and roses? Hindi naman puwede 'yon. 'As I've been telling this artist from Paete who is a very good craftsman, Baldemor: You will be rich and you will be famous but you will never be great until you make social comment. My greatest example in this regard is not only Picasso but the Mexican renaissance

LIKHAAN: Diego Rivera.

FSJ: Yes, also his contemporaries Siqueiros and Orozco who joined the

Mexican revolution. The American artist Jean Charlot was also with them. He gave an exhibition of his work in our gallery. He lectured on the Mexican renaissance. It took about thirty years, 1910-1940. All these artists after the revolution were commissioned by their government to make murals and to paint the damaged buildings and the new buildings. So they started painting their experience of the Mexican revolution: peasants, soldiers, the Indians, the historic characters. At first the Mexican elite, conditioned by classical images of Western art, failed to appreciate them. But afterwards, they became the hallmark of the Mexican renaissance. And they influenced not only Latin American art, but even American art. Botong Francisco was very much impressed by the Mexican renaissance. Again, that is when social commentary gives a particular patina or aura, not only of reality but of greatness to art. And it's the same thing with literature.

LIKHAAN: In a piece that was published in *Atlantic Monthly*, James Fallows described the Philippines as having a “damaged culture.” Do you agree? I think you were among the people he interviewed.

FSJ: Of course, definitely. The Spaniards came here, Christianized us, told us to go to church and we went to church. When we left the church we found out that we had lost our lands. The Americans said, you go to school and be educated. We went to school. When we left school, we found out we had lost our souls.

LIKHAAN: Your early story ‘The God stealer’ that is much anthologized appears to anticipate the themes of your latter works: betrayal of the native and rural by the citified bourgeoisie; the uneasy relationship between Filipinos and foreigners, especially Americans; regaining cultural integrity.

FSJ: It's a commentary on the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. Our problem is how to decolonize our minds. Remember that at the outset, the ilustrados only wanted to be equal with the Spaniards, to have seats in the Spanish congress. They did not want to be free from the Spaniards. That's the entire problem with so many of us. We want to be equal to the Americans not to be free from them. That is one of the greatest liabilities of the Filipino intellectual: That we continue to apologize for Spanish colonialism, for American colonialism, even for domestic

colonialism. The intellectuals don't want to free themselves from these strangling but invisible chains. Incidentally, the story is based on an actual incident. During the 1950s I worked for one year with the United States Information Service (USIS). It was my first job after college. And I got to meet an American cultural officer named Bill. He was a very nice young man. At the same time there was also an Ifugao working in the Press office. So one time, when I was already working with the *Manila Times*- I still dropped by the USIS office occasionally to ask for bond paper, I was very poor- I bumped into this Ifugao friend who invited me to go with him and Bill to Banaue. We took the Dangwa bus. There were no hotels back then so we stayed in the house of Bill Bayer, the son of Otley (the anthropologist) who was still living then. Banaue was just a small sleepy village in those days. And there were no established tourist shops. But Bill chanced upon a bulol (indigenous statue) and wanted to bring it home. So he started haggling. Our Ifugao friend said: No, don't buy any of those, tonight I'll just go to the terraces and steal one for you. That's how the story came about.

LIKHAAN: You mentioned your work for the USIS. Some people have accused you of being a CIA. Is this true?

FSJ: That CIA label came about I think in 1971. It 's funny because that was also when I first went to the Soviet Union to attend the 50th anniversary of the October revolution- which wasn't really in October since the Russians went by a different calendar ... By that time I was already a member of the congress for cultural freedom. The congress for cultural freedom was a non-communist cultural organization set up in Paris. La Liberte de Culture. That's the French name. It included world famous literary figures like Albert Camus; there were European, Latin American and Asian writers. They sponsored, in England *Encounter*, that's the British magazine. In Germany, *Der Monat*. In France, *Preuves*. In Mexico, *Examen*. In Australia, *Quadrant*. And here, *Solidarity*. But first, I'll tell you about *Solidarity*. This is all related. You see, our generation was matured by WWII, so when we started writing after the war, we were already old people. I wrote *The Pretenders* when I was in my 20s. Many of those chapters were written when I was 18 but when you read it now it's quite a matured novel. So even

when I was with the *Manila Times*, in the 1950s, I already had a kind of vision about how this country should be. And so I started travelling around Southeast Asia in '55. I believed that considering our advancement, we should be the leaders in Southeast Asia. But that idea was modified when I met Sukarno in Malacañang.

In the 50s, Sukarno often came to Manila in cognito because he had several women lovers here and some of the Filipino politicians and entrepreneurs who have interests in Indonesia were his go-betweens. During one of my visits to President Quirino, I chanced upon Sukarno in Malacañang. I introduced myself and we talked. He impressed upon me that Indonesia was the natural leader of the region since they were the biggest, most populous country in Southeast Asia with the most resources. So, I thought to myself, 'okay, we'll just be the intellectual leaders of the region' and I felt very justified in thinking so during those days because I knew a bit of Indonesian history. When Indonesia became independent in 1945, to the best of my knowledge; it had only 114 university graduates. Anyway, this idea for a quarterly, an intellectual journal, came from Elmer Ordonez. Back then the *Sunday Times Magazine* of which I was a staff member, and later editor, was already publishing a lot of serious articles on politics as well as the finest fiction and poetry. But I felt it was inadequate. So Elmer gathered people including myself, O. D. Corpuz, Rey Gregorio, Alex Hufana, Raul Ingles and we set up *Comment* as a quarterly. It was published by Alberto Benipayo. Then I left for Hong Kong to edit the *Asia* magazine. And that gave me an opportunity to go around the region and establish contacts with writers from all over. When I left the magazine, I was already prepared to put out *Solidarity*. So when I left the Colombo Plan in 1964* *Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic Development was organized in 1950 by 26 countries to promote development in Asia and the Pacific. Jose worked as Information Officer at the headquarters in Colombo, Sri Lanka from 1962 to 64.

I set up this book shop (Solidaridad) and the publication (Soldarity) immediately. For funding the magazine, I got \$10,000 from the Congress for Cultural Freedom. That is why if you look at the

Solidaridad
BOOK SHOP



issues of Solidarity it always acknowledges the assistance from the Congress. Then around '69 I think, a story appeared in the international press that the Congress for Cultural Freedom was funded partially by the CIA. That started it. And what was a bit, not ironic, but somewhat funny was that at the time that that charge came out, I had just returned from Moscow. Remember, my generation, many of us were very pro-communist. But I was never a communist, just pro-communist. If you read *My Brother My Executioner* or my other novels, you will see that I have a very strong pro-Huk position. But during my first trip to Eastern Europe, in '68 or '69, that was when my pro-communism collapsed. When I got back I displayed all these Russian posters in our art gallery cum bookshop. They sold like hotcakes. But that CIA charge quite worried me because the bookshop was our livelihood. Sabi ko, naku, naloko na, wala nang pupunta sa bookshop (no one will want to come anymore). I wasn't worried about the support from the Congress. I was worried about the bookshop going bankrupt. The following day puno ng tao (we were filled to rafters). Everybody wanted to see what a CIA front looked like. And then one of my old friends came to me and said: Hoy Frankie, ang lakas-lakas mo pala sa American Embassy. Tulungan mo naman akong magkaroon ng visa (help me get a visa to the US). I thought the controversy would destroy Solidaridad, but it didn't. I had to file a case in court against this fellow who made that charge.

LIKHAAN: You won?

FSJ: Of course I won. But I made a mistake. I filed a criminal rather than a civil case. So he was fined I don't know how much. And somebody told me: "you should have filed a civil case so you would have gotten money."

LIKHAAN: More recently you were charged with racism, are you anti-Chinese?

FSJ: Ha, ha, ha. My wife's grandfather had pigtails. My objection is not to all Chinese, but to some Chinese especially the very wealthy ones because they send all the millions of pesos they make here abroad. Uli Schmetzer's recent book *The Chinese Juggernaut* describes how the overseas Southeast Asian Chinese contributed 80 percent to the modernization of the Chinese economy and yet there's still

lots of room for investment here. Of course there are also poor Chinese and many Chinese-Filipinos who are committed to this country. It's fine for them to be loyal to their culture as I am loyal to my being Ilocano. They should be loyal to their language, to their arts and so forth but there should be a distinction between Chinese culture and the Chinese state. In other words, I'd like them to contribute as much as they can to the development of this country which after all is where they were born and will probably die. So they should be loyal to this country without abjuring their roots because traditional Chinese values can contribute a lot to this country: Their work ethic, their commitment to their groups, their capacity for saving and industry. Besides, I level the same charge (disloyalty) against the rich Spanish mestizos like the Zobel-Ayals who not only look down on this country but whose money is all over the world. I also level the same charge against rich (indigenous) Filipinos especially people like Marcos (late former president) who salted so much money abroad.

LIKHAAN: Why write fiction then rather than journalism given your advocacies?

FSJ: You cannot say much in journalism because you have to have documents, you have to have proof. And there's always that charge of libel that hangs over your head. And worse than that, they can always silence you by other means. And fiction is not really a weapon of cowards. Why did Rizal write novels? He could have just been a propagandist and pamphleteer. Because he knew that art lives on long after the events that inspire it.

LIKHAAN: You mentioned *The Pretenders*, can you tell us a bit more about it? It's one of your early novels and it has been staged as a play.

FSJ: I wrote many of those chapters on the run because I was poor, I had to earn a living. So what I did was write chapters as short stories. Then I sold them as short stories. And then later I wove them into a novel that was serialized in the weekly women's magazine. We were very fortunate during those days because we had a very sympathetic editor, Delia Albert Zulueta. The weekly magazine which was published by the Roces family serialized a lot of novels in those days, including those of NVM Gonzalez and Edilberto Tiempo.

LIKHAAN: Who are your major influences?

FSJ: I would say that more than anyone else, Rizal. The Rizal novels were the first novels in English that I read when I was in Grade 5. I had a very good grade school teacher Soledad Oriel, (she's passed on), who gave them to me. She also gave me Willa Cathers' *My Antonia* to read then, *Don Quixote*. When my mother found out that I love to read, she went around town looking for books for me. She borrowed from people who had books- teachers, government officials. My mother was perhaps the single greatest influence in my life. She was a tiny peasant woman. She never wore western dress, only *baro't saya* and her hair was always in a bun, *pingle*, we call it (in Iloko). And she never wore shoes except those slippers we call *kuchos* that are still in use. But she was able to finish Grade 7. And she spoke beautiful English, always correct and grammatical. She was taught by *Thomasites* (first batch of teachers from the US). In those days if you finish Grade 7, you were sometimes allowed to teach school already... I came to Manila at 13, on April, 1937. Shortly after I finished grade school in Rosales. I took the train from my hometown to Paniqui, Tarlac and transferred to the bigger Ilocos Express that traveled to Tutuban station (in Manila). It was my first train ride. I had my *pasalubong*- a bundle of firewood and a bag of vegetables- and my *tampipi* (rattan case). A kindly uncle took me in so I could attend high school. He met me at the station. Manila was very different then.

LIKHAAN: Some critics refer to a Philippine English or Filipino English. Do you think there's such a thing or are they just been patronizing?

FSJ: No, there is. My Russian translator mentioned this, it's a different kind of English, and even Fr. Bernad has observed the difference between our English and those of the Irish or the English in England; the timber is different. And one can also distinguish between American and British writing. Although they are not necessarily opaque, I find English novels more difficult to get into while American novels seem to let you in the door at once. That's my feeling.

LIKHAAN: Are you optimistic about the future of writing in English in the Philippines, especially for those who want social change? Are they reaching a sizeable readership?

FSJ: It's very difficult to say. In spite of the increase in population, sales of my books have gone down. Maybe it's economics. I'm not too sure. But English for sure is going to be here for a long time. But what I would like to see in our schools is the inclusion of a foreign language other than English. In high school, not in college. I'd like to see Spanish included because it should be easy for us to learn how to speak Spanish, because so many loan words. You know when I'm in South America, or in Spain, I can't converse in Spanish because I had a lousy teacher in Spanish in college. But I get around. Knowing another language is always an advantage. But that's not so much the point. What worries me is the continued shallowness of Filipinos.

LIKHAAN: What do you mean?

FSJ: We are a very shallow people.

LIKHAAN: Is this because of the educational system?

FSJ: Basically, the educational system. When I say these things, remember I have no academic proof. I just go by instinct. You know very well that most Asians were influenced by either Buddhism or Hinduism. And these two great religions have a very profound philosophical background. Christianity also has a great and wide philosophical background especially if you go back in time and trace it to the ancient Romans and to the ancient Greeks. After all, the Bible was originally written in Greek. But we don't teach Latin anymore or even Greek in school. And most of us have no background in the Greek or Latin classics. And that is where I have, I think, an advantage over so many of our young people today, I read the Greek myths in grade school- Ulysses, Medusa all that stuff. Because I was poor I didn't take anything for granted, so when I came to Manila for High School I was in the National Library every afternoon reading the classics: Aristotle, Plato...the Romans and Greeks. Then I moved on to the English classics, to Dickens and to Melville, and so on. I have that kind of background.

LIKHAAN: Do you do a lot of research?

FSJ: Yes, of course when I'm writing. I had a visitor once, a doctor, who asked me if I took up medicine? I said "no, but I tried to." He said my story 'Olvidon' sounded like it was written by someone with a medical background because the terms are quite accurate.

I do a lot of research. And this is what I tell young people who are writing. You know, if you are writing about a deaf person, you better know how a deaf person reacts, how he got to be deaf. How his deafness might be cured. Things like that.

LIKHAAN: The theme of betrayal seems to loom large in your work. Betrayal of the peasant by the bourgeoisie, of brother by brother, of leaders...

FSJ: I see it all the time. Well, you start with our leaders. There are very few of them who did not betray their own ideals. That's the whole idea of *Tree*. Have you seen a balete tree? How does it start? As a sapling, then suddenly its vines gather around it, strangle the tree and become the tree itself. Look at Marcos. He started out so well. O.D. Corpus once said to me that he was optimistic about Marcos because, first, Marcos had a 'sense of history' which means he will try to do his best, second he was Ilocano- like us- which means he was hardworking. He would persevere to achieve his goals. But what happened? Most of the time it's us betraying ourselves.

LIKHAAN: There seems to be a lot of anger in your work.

FSJ: Of course. Alam mo, in this country when you stop being angry, you are dead, you are no longer responding to the evil that's happening all around us.

LIKHAAN: Your five book saga- *Poon*, *Pretenders*, *My Brother My Executioner*, *Mass and Tree* that took decades to complete did you plan it out before hand?

FSJ: That series was inspired by the *Noli* and the *Fili* as well as by William Faulkner's novels and by John Steinbeck. In a sense, also by Dickens because I read Dickens when I was in high school. But basically it was Rizal. Remember, Ibarra became Simon. One of the first novels in that quintet is *Tree*. I wrote those chapters there really as short stories. The idea came from the 'Wayward Bus' of Steinbeck. It's one of his little known novels. This bus is stalled in a small town and the passengers get out and get to know the townspeople. That's the view of the story. I improved on that. I improved also on the *Yoknapatawpha* novels (of Faulkner) by building this characters that are related to one another. And also I did not confine the setting to this town but included the city as well. So there's an ongoing tension between town and city,



between urban proletariat and the peasant. And there's also the generational conflict between the old and the new and the passing of power from the Spanish hierarch to the rich Filipinos to the new generation, including the revolutionaries.

LIKHAAN: You really planned the five?

FSJ: No, only four. The concluding novel which I wrote first was the Pretenders. 'Yon ang ending sana. When I wrote that ending, I already wrote Poon. But the first chapter of Poon came out in 1958. I had to read a lot on history but the whole plotting was already very clear in my mind.

LIKHAAN: Do you outline your books?

FSJ: No, I never make outlines. What I do is I make character sketches. Then as I go along, I develop them. But at the same time I let them grow.

LIKHAAN: In what way?

FSJ: In the sense that once you imbue a character with a certain quality you can't alter it willy-nilly. He has his own life. You can't make him do something that is not in conformity with his character.

The Pretenders is the last book (of the saga) but it's one of the first that I wrote. And I intended the quartet to end in a very negative note because that is what I saw: there is no future for our sad nation unless there is a revolution. That is why the main character commits suicide, but that suicide is not just one man's passing. It's an allegory about the necessity of destroying the old order to give way to the new. Then Marcos declared Martial Law and I wasn't allowed to travel for four years. But by the second year of Martial Law, I saw these young activists like Eman Lacaba (poet and activist who was killed in Mindanao) fight back and I was heartened. I realized that the young would meet the challenge of the times. So, much as I was disillusioned with communism, I was very much supportive of the New People's Army during the Marcos regime. So when I saw all these young people joining the revolution, I knew I had to say something positive about them through the character of Pepe Samson. I conceptualized the story (of Mass) from the plane to Paris. Mass could be subtitled: The Education of Pepe Samson. But I also wrote it as a picaresque adventure ala Don Quixote.

LIKHAAN: You mention your mother a lot. How about your father? Did he have any influence in your work?

FSJ: No, he was an Aglipayan (Philippine Independent Church) priest. And he left us when...I don't even know when he left us. Later I reunited with him but there was no longer any affection between us. So my surrogate father actually was my wife's father.

LIKHAAN: If you didn't become a writer, what do you think you would have become? An educator?

FSJ: No, a doctor. I would have been a doctor. During the war, when I was studying in the University of Santo Tomas, I was staying with a rich cousin who was a doctor. So that's how I learned to give intravenous injections and take blood pressure. So when the Americans reached Rosales (Jose returned to his hometown during the later years of WWII and he was there when the US military recaptured the Philippines from Japan) I immediately joined the medical corps. and was given a rank of technical sergeant.

LIKHAAN: You have seven children. How did you manage to raise such a big family as a writer?

FSJ: My wife should be here so she could listen to this. We always told our kids that all that we could give them was a good education. So they understood that and applied themselves. When I was with the Sunday Times, every school year opening I would be at Chino Roces' (the publisher) office door with the voucher. "What's this for?" he'd asked every time, and I'd say: tuition. But you know, Chino liked me very much and so did the older sister, si Bebung.

LIKHAAN: You worked as a journalist for many years and received several awards for your work....

FSJ: Yes with *Manila Times*. I sometimes kid Marcos Roces the nephew of the older Roceses, although he joined the *Times* when I'd left. I'd tell him: "You people exploited me, you paid me so little." But in spite of that, the ten years that I spend with the *Times*, were very, very good years for me. I have nothing but praise for the Roceses in that sense, because they gave me absolute freedom. They never interfered. As a matter of fact they never interfered with the editorial department. And to the best of my knowledge, I was the only one who was given a car by Chino. They are really a different breed altogether. First, they were never ostentatious. Second, they never used the *Manila Times* to advance their own interest. I was with the *Times magazine* not the *Daily* but I got so many awards in journalism. I wrote on a lot of things especially on land reform. One time I wrote an article about scavengers being shot dead in Clark Air Base. So, a couple of American officers, I think they were colonels, came to the *Times* to complain. Chino called me to his office. I said if they had any complaints they could write these down and we'll put it out in the magazine. The officers left and that was that. Also, my expense vouchers were signed without question so instead of taking annual monthly vacations I went to Sulu, I went to Mindanao to explore. Kung saan-saan ako pumupunta. And one time, Bebung called me to her office I was worried because she looked angry. She said some of her friends were complaining about my articles on land reform. I told her all my articles were documented and I could vouch for everything I wrote. And that I was prepared to face any libel charge myself. It turned out she was indeed worried about libel charges. "So, do you have problems with your work?" she asked me. "Yes Ms. Roces,"

I replied, “I have to do so much research.” “You get a research assistant immediately,” she said. So I had one of the staff members of the *Manila Times* as research assistant. Another time I got an award from National Press Club. I did not attend the ceremonies. She said: “I got your award last night at the National Press Club because you weren’t there. Why did you not go?” I told her I didn’t have a barong Tagalog. Within an hour she had a new one delivered to me. They were that kind of people.

LIKHAAN: You have witness nearly a century of Philippine history unfold. are you hopeful for the country and for our literature?

FSJ: I’ve seen three generations of Filipino leaders come and go and I’m not very optimistic. The only time that I really had great optimism was when Magsaysay was president. When he died, people in the streets wept. When I attended Ninoy Aquino’s funeral I didn’t see people weeping that way. So when people say that we are not capable of producing leaders, no, that’s not true. That’s not true at all.

LIKHAAN: You have any advice for young writers, aspiring writers?

FSJ: One of the greatest tasks of Filipino writers really is how to make Filipinos remember. Not only to remember but to love this country. You don’t have to teach farmers how to do that because they deal with the land, they love the land. It’s the urbanized, the rich, who don’t have that kind of affection for the land. And without that kind of affection for the land itself, walang mangyari sa atin (we will go nowhere). And that starts with memory. We cannot blame colonialism all the time, it’s a dead horse. We must really look within ourselves for the kind of love that will transcend us as individuals. That is what I don’t like so much about writers like Jose Garcia Villa, because people like him were so narcissistic. If you do not think of others, if you’re only concerned with yourself, you will dry up as a writer. And that is one reason I think why Garcia Villa stopped writing at 50. Narcissism can only go so far. I don’t know, but that’s my feeling. And you have to keep stoking the passion. I knew many good writers when I was a young man but they died artistically, some went abroad. They never flourished. Their roots were severed early enough and once those roots are severed, you’re done. I remember the words of my favorite American jurist, Judge

Learned Hand, he said: freedom is in the heart. When it dies there, no constitution, no court of law, can ever revive it. It's the same thing with writing.

LIKHAAN: Any Regrets?

FSJ: In the 1950's, I could have joined Andres Soriano and become one of his top executives. I know how to handle myself with all sorts of people. In other words, I'm adaptable. That's one of my regrets especially when my wife complains about our finances. The other was when Luis Araneta offered me all the capital I needed to expand Solidaridad, no question asked for five years. This was in the 1970's, before Martial Law. He was then one of the richest men in the country. You know, I never took advantage of the people I knew. Not because of pride, but because I've survived all sorts of hardships since I was a boy. So with that kind of background, I never felt I needed the help of the rich. At the same time... but like I said, there are regrets. Imagine... that offer was made to me before National bookstore started operations. Solidaridad was the first bookshop in the country with air conditioning and a sound system. Carlos Romulo (late former Minister of Foreign Affairs) opened this bookshop. The first title that I published was Romulo's 'Identity and Change.' Well, I sometimes rue the choices I've made in life now that you have a third rate movie maker who makes millions. You know, (Carlo) Caparas, who has the gall to accept the National Artist Award. He earns millions, while many first class writers can hardly make a living from their writing. I cannot make a living on my... how many translations? If I lived on my royalties, I would have starved to death long ago. What I would like for this country is also to be a nation of readers. Not so much for writers to be more comfortable but so that we'll have a thinking people who will not elect people like Erap Estrada because if people do not read, then they become, without their meaning to, shallow. And if they become shallow, they usher into office these nincompoops.

LIKHAAN: Is it important for beginning writers to be part of a writer's organizations like Philippine Pen?

FSJ: I found out how important writers organizations are during the Martial Law years. First, an organization gave the writers a sense of community and, hopefully, a sense of purpose and a sense of

nation. One of the things that mark our generation of writers from those of today is that we went out of our way to meet our literary elders. People like S. P. Lopez, Leopoldo Yabes, Federico Mangahas, Teodoro Lansang. They were ten...fifteen years ahead of me. But I went out of my way to know them because I've been reading them. In other words, I wasn't imprisoned by generation or geography. And to me that's very, very important. All writers tend to compete with one another. It's part of the territory, part of the job. And sadly, we don't even read one another. But we should, in a sense, get to know each other so that we can form a community especially when such a time as that kind of oppression ever comes back. You know during the Martial Law years, I felt so alone. Many of us felt so powerless and isolated. And every time there was some kind of grouping, as with Pen, that gave us moral strength, more so when foreign writers came to work for the release of the writers in prison, because there were many writers then in prison. Aside from that this is one way we can form a community and a common purpose and a common sense of nation.

LIKHAAN: Is there a passage from your books that you like reading in public?

FSJ: This is the last paragraph in the novel of Po-on. The main character Istak is in Tirad Pass where he knows he will die. And these are his last thoughts: "This is our gift not to him but to Filipinas. Honorable cripple, I'm not a patriot. But how do you measure the sacrifice this poor man beside me has made? He lies still. His hands no longer feel. He is so young, so very young. What had life promised to hold for him? Who is the woman he would have made happy? Who would have borne his children? Honorable cripple you know the answers. And God, do I take Your name in vain? I don't know why I am here when I could have ran away. It must be pride or stubbornness of which men of the north have plenty. If it is pride, what then can I be proud of? I have nothing to show. Nothing which I have built by myself. Why then am I here? I will search the depths and will find nothing there. Nothing but duty, duty, duty."