

## WHY WE DON'T WRITE MORE NOVELS, BUT SHOULD (THE CHALLENGE TO THE FILIPINO FICTIONIST)

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Don't look now, but the 31st of March 2008 is going to be a very important day in the calendar of the Filipino novelist. On that blessed day, three major competitions involving novel-writing will mark their deadline: the Palanca, which receives novels once every three years; the one-time, P200,000 Gawad Likhaan UP Centennial Award, which has a category for the novel (or short story collection) in English and Filipino, and the Man Asian Literary Prize, for the best Asian novel yet unpublished but submitted in English.

The big question is, how many Filipino novelists will rise to this occasion (presuming they're interested in winning prizes—which, believe me, no matter what they say, they are)?

I've recently found myself wondering about the answer to that question, which seems to be "Not very many." When I attended the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize ceremonies in Hong Kong earlier this month, there was some curiosity about the state of the Filipino novel. (We have to realize, of course, that in the currency of global literary publishing, the novel is just about the only thing that counts—not the poem, not the short story, not the play.)

I told them that the novel was alive and well in the Philippines—that our writers in both English and Filipino were coming out with new work every year. On the other hand, the volume of work being done was nothing to crow about. Few novels were being written, and—like my own recent one, *Soledad's Sister*—most of them were slim, no more than 200 pages in published form. Dean Alfar's *Salamanca* (2006), for example, is 159 pages; F. Sionil Jose's *Vibora* (2007) is just 118. Based on the current proofs, *Soledad's Sister* will be around 180 pages when it comes out early next year. A notable exception is Charlson Ong's 368-page *Banyaga* (2007).

Of the short story, on the other hand, we have no shortage. I was a judge in this year's Palanca Awards for the short story in English, and I believe that we received the highest number of entries ever in this category—147 stories.

By comparison, of the 243 qualified novels received by the Man Asian, only about ten, I was told, came from the Philippines. More than half came from South Asia (mostly India, whose authors also accounted for 11 of the 23 works on the prize's long list—four of them from just one city, Chennai). Ten novels from Manila is not a bad turnout for a new contest, except that, as with the other countries, these presumably included works that had long been in progress, or had been started much earlier.

It should be interesting to see how many novels turn up for the three big events next year.

These competitions will certainly encourage the writing of more novels, but they still won't change the fact that we Filipino fictionists don't write nearly as many novels as our neighbors do. The question is, why?

My own quick answer is, why should we? At least until recently, we haven't seen enough artistic and other incentives to consistently write and publish novels, or to choose to write novels over other alternatives. As every novelist knows, writing a novel typically takes several years. Even if the physical act of writing it could be much shorter than that, the novel as a project takes a much larger and longer emotional and psychological toll on the writer than a story, poem, or essay will. We sleep, eat, defecate, and fornicate with our novels perched on our shoulders.

And all of this for what? For a first and most likely a last edition of 1,000 copies, which will take over a year to sell, if it does at all. Even at a relatively high royalty of 15 percent, presuming the book sells for a modest P300 or just over US\$6 a copy, a Filipino novelist will stand to earn P45,000 or about US\$1,000 for a few years' work. There will be no overseas markets, no film rights, no residuals, and—unless the book is picked up by schools for teaching—no reprints to look forward to.

This isn't to say that all we should write for is fortune and fame—although a little of both will always be welcome. Stories, poems, plays, and essays won't get us very far, either. But given a range of options, the Filipino writer can hardly be blamed if he or she chooses less tedious forms of artistic expression. Short stories, for example, can be written in a matter of days and published

within months; screenplays can give vent to our novelistic impulses, aside from earning us much more, provided we make the right connections and break into the industry.

But other than material reasons, I suspect that we Filipinos don't write novels as much as we write other forms of literature because—and I realize how controversial this statement might be—we generally don't have the sensibility or the athleticism for it (and may I emphasize “generally” here). Novels have traditionally required a largeness of vision, a broadness of scope, and our best-known ones—Rizal's *Noli* and *Fili*, Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, and F. Sionil Jose's Rosales series—have certainly demonstrated that. I've often remarked that our contemporary novelists inevitably labor in the shadow of Rizal—you can almost feel him breathing down your neck—with the result that many modern novels have become reworkings in a way of the *Noli* and *Fili*: love stories set against the crimson backdrop of revolution, with middle-class characters torn between what they know, what they want, and what they actually can do, which turns out to be not very much. Rizal is a tough act to follow, and rather than produce just another update of the *Noli*—with a new cast of heroes and villains in the same old society, which seems to be our fated plot—I might opt to do something else, like a small private story.

Novels traditionally demand sweeping views from the mountaintop. Our problem is, we have very few mountaintops here in the Philippines; of the few that we have, even fewer of us have the lungs or the inclination to scale them. Instead we have become master pedestrians, or masters of the street scene, which is why we do so well with the short story, which requires little more than a few hours or a few days of action in places like cafeterias, boarding houses, and alleyways. We often complain that our attention span as a people is very short—such that the past 30 years of our politics might as well never have happened, since no real wrongs have been redressed and no one has really been punished as we lurch from one mishap to the next. That might explain why our attention spans as readers and writers are equally brief. We see history as a distant, bloody, romantic past that we dress up for to commemorate—not as the continuously unraveling, insidiously common thread it is.

We—especially our writers in English—rarely venture out of the city; thus the only panoramas in our predominantly short fiction are those on travel posters on the wall of the office cubicle. Our forests—albeit our denuded ones—and our oceans do not figure in our work, and neither do the lives of

our people in these places. In other words, our fictional space has become very small and very crowded, with a very low ceiling. This is not again to say that we cannot do or have not done wonders within that space—within, shall we say, that rat's eye view of the world—but I'm afraid that many of our younger writers might start believing that the world is indeed that small, and shrink their brains and imaginations just to fill it rather than expand that space.

Of course as I say this I have to add that, maybe precisely because of their larger canvases, our contemporary novels—few as they are—have tended to do bigger and different things. Prof. Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo—herself an accomplished fictionist and novelist—did a recent study of four of these novels: *The Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café* by Alfred A. Yuson, *The Firewalkers* by Erwin Castillo, *Sky Over Dimas* by Vicente Garcia Groyon, and *Banyaga: A Song of War* by Charlson Ong. Of these she observed that:

Two of the novels are in the non-realist mode, and two might be described as more or less 'realist' . . . Fantasy in one form or the other plays an important role in three of them. In the one novel where it does not, the material is so extravagant as to seem surreal. And yet, the authors seem at pains to ground their narratives in a definite historical time and place, not merely through detailed, concrete description, but through references to actual persons connected with historical events.

Comedy and tragedy freely commingle in all four, as do parody and pathos. . . . All the novels—even those that are primarily in the realist mode—contain scenes more commonly found in melodrama than in the realist novel: the flamboyance, the gothic detail, the extravagant gesture. On the other hand, given their historical grounding, they obviously have a serious point to make. . . . Moreover, they are all saying it in remarkably cinematic ways. It is easy to imagine all four translated into Filipino and turned into movies. (59)

Our few novelists continue to share, with Rizal, our fascination for the big picture, the acute awareness of history in progress, of history in the present; but they are also seeking new ways and forms of dealing with the material, within and beyond realism.

And this is exactly why we need to write more novels: because they are exceptions unto themselves; because they force us to form fuller, clearer

pictures of ourselves; because they have so much more room to grow; and because—I say this with some trepidation, knowing that I’m making a gross generalization—no one will take us seriously on the global stage unless we announce ourselves with big, emphatic, memorable novels. As unfair as that may sound to the writers of other genres—and also to writers who may not care at all, for their own good reasons, to be read abroad—it’s the hard fact of literature as a global industry. Collections of poetry and short fiction will be picked up by university and small presses and released in small editions; but the novel is the big whale in the ocean that publishers and agents have their harpoons at the ready for.

At the same time—or even before we dream of selling (and then being remaindered) in New York, we Filipino authors in English have to sell more books in this country, and I’m coming around to thinking that the fault, dear Brutus, is no longer in our readership but in ourselves. True, books of almost any kind are expensive in this country. Also true, we may have focused on just producing what we think of as great art because there’s little money to be made, which isn’t so bad. But it’s also a fact that many Filipinos are buying books—and let’s face it, those who are primarily middle-class—except that they’re not buying us. In other words, the market is there but we’ve given up on fighting for our share of it.

By this I mean that we’re not writing about the things that might prove interesting to our potential readers; we wouldn’t mind being popular, but we shun the popular. The crimes that pepper our tabloids hardly ever make it to our fiction. Clearly, we need to write more popular or genre fiction—novels that employ not only the fantastic, but also more crime, more sex, and more humor. They may not necessarily be great novels, but good ones—novels that can attract and develop a new class of readers, be serialized, be turned into movies, be talked about over Monday-morning coffee. We also need more professional translators who can turn the best of our novels in Filipino into internationally marketable manuscripts.

I should admit, as soon as I say this, that I’ve done very little myself to fill my own prescription. Younger writers like Felisa Batacan and Dean Alfar and his group of “speculative fiction” writers are doing much more by raising the profile of a kind of fiction that seems to resonate with younger readers and can acquire a substantial following.

I gave myself curious little goals when I was working on *Soledad's Sister*. I knew what I didn't want to do. I didn't want to do another take on the *Noli*, although I still felt sucked into it in terms of creating, say, representative towns and townfolk. I didn't want to do—at least for now—a novel populated by writers, artists, muses, anyone quoting anyone else or giving lectures on epistemology or baroque music. I didn't want to do a novel that spans centuries and involves Dons and Doñas and anyone with a three-part Spanish name. In other words, I didn't want to write an epic. I wanted to do a small, mostly quiet, darkly comic novel involving ordinary people in absurd situations and covering no more than a few days of real time.

I think that's sort of what I did with *Soledad's Sister*, which needs more work even at this point, and which I'll be revising soon for publication early next year. After that, it could be back to the short story for me—or maybe I never left it, because, in terms of narrative structure, *Soledad's Sister* is really a long story rather than short novel. There's a lot more for me to learn, and a lot more for us to do, about writing the novel.

### Works Cited

Hidalgo, Cristina Pantoja. *Fabulists and Chroniclers*. Quezon City: University of Philippines Press, 2008.