A PERSONAL HISTORY OF READING AND WRITING

I WAS LUCKY to have grown up in a house with books. The women in our family were all teachers, from my great-grandmother down to my mother. From an early age, I had learned from them the importance of reading. My mother owned a full set of Collier's Junior Classics from her own childhood, which had found its way to our home. It stayed in the bottom shelf of a bookcase in our living room, where it was low enough for me to reach. Although the stories in those books were beyond my reading comprehension at the time, I still found myself flipping through their pages, if only to marvel at the illustrations. Whenever I wanted to hear a story, I would ask my mother to read it to me before bed. It was through this set of books that I was introduced to Greek mythology, the American West, the Arabian Nights, and that exotic yet familiar place called the Orient. And there were other books, too, like my mother's beautifully illustrated book of European fairy tales and the various picture books I would point to in the bookstore.

Storytelling was an important part of my childhood. I was fortunate to have had books at home, but maybe even more fortunate to have grown up with a wealth of oral tales. On nights when we had no electricity—it was the '90s, and there were many such nights—my mother would tell me her own abridged version of *The Lord of The Rings*. I learned about hobbits, dwarves, elves, and dragons when all other children were learning about Piglet and Winnie the Pooh. These strange creatures were thrown into an odd basket that already contained aswangs, tikbalangs, and tiyanaks, which I picked up from my grandparents, our household help, and the Magandang Gabi Bayan Halloween specials. My grandfather would

often tell us stories about the time he and his younger brother were chased by a magkakalag, a self-segmenting aswang from Pampanga lore, while they were fleeing from Japanese soldiers during World War II. My mother would tell me how when she was a girl, she and her brothers were terrorized by a life-sized doll that got up and walked around their house in the middle of the night. And then when I was around seven, our yaya got possessed by a duwende from our garden. These were the stories that made up my childhood world. In my imagination, hobbits, evil dolls, and the gods of Olympus rubbed shoulders with the magkakalag and the duwende that possessed our yaya.

I was about grade four when my grandparents gifted me with an illustrated book of poetry. It contained everything from nursery rhymes to the long and florid poems of William Wordsworth, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and John Keats. I remember falling so much in love with the poems that I couldn't help but commit them to memory and burst out in poetic flourish at nobody's request. My teachers suffered the most from this. I quoted poetry whenever I recited in class, which was all the time. There was one science class where our teacher was discussing pollination. She asked us if we could imagine ourselves as a bee pollinating flowers. Being the oppressively eager student that I was, I raised my hand and said that I, as a bee, "wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills."[1] I went on to quote much of the poem, down to the last part where Wordsworth's daffodils "flash upon that inward eye / Which is a bliss of solitude." I sat down with a cheeky grin on my face, knowing that I had successfully talked above the heads of all my classmates and that my teacher was surely impressed. After I ran out of lines from Romantic poetry, I would quote lines from Broadway musicals. My teachers were amused at first, but it didn't take too long for them to get annoyed. Thankfully, my life as a nine-year-old Lord Byron ended when I turned ten.

At around the same time, I attempted to read more grown-up books, which I understood to be books with less pictures and more words. I remember that one of my first book purchases was *The White Stag* by Kate Seredy. I saved up some of my allowance and purchased this book from the long-gone Goodwill Bookstore, which used to be in the basement of SM Megamall. The shelf from which I had taken the book was full of

1 William Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," in A Children's Book of Verse, ed. Marjorie Rogers (Brimax Books, 1992), 89.

Newberry winners. It was then that I started collecting Newberry books. Because some of them were a bit too complicated for my age, I didn't really read them in full until a few years later.

One book that really opened itself up to me was CS Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* I was thrilled to discover that it was part of a seven-book series called The Chronicles of Narnia. I then proceeded to hunt for all seven books, which took me several years to complete. While I was searching for all the Narnia books, I chanced upon another book in a similar vein: *The High King* by Lloyd Alexander, the last book in the Prydain Chronicles. This book was just as magical as *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* but a delectable bit darker. I collected the Prydain and Narnia books at about the same time. A few years later, after putting down the last Narnia book, I felt my world change. I was moved in ways I couldn't really explain. That was probably my first true encounter with the power of literature.

But let's go back to grade five, right when I was just starting to hoard Newberry books. That was a significant phase for me because it was also the time I started writing stories. They began as descriptive paragraphs before transforming into little essays of no more than just a page. At the time, I wasn't really writing as much as mimicking what I had already read. I remember buying the biggest notebook I could find at National Book Store and journaling about my day-to-day life. I convinced myself that if I wrote every day about the most mundane things—my classmates, my teachers, our homework—I would end up with a book after about a year. Being the overeager child that I was, I committed to publish a book by the end of grade five and win a Newberry Medal by the end of grade six at the ripe old age of eleven.

Admittedly, I was a rather self-assured, slightly annoying little boy. I think I behaved the way I did because I knew I was more well read than my classmates and that I could write better than most of them. My grades validated this. I got the highest marks in English and was a frequent recipient of the Best Writer in English Award, which was given out at the end of every quarter. When I didn't receive the award, I would get disappointed and become quite competitive. Of course, my love for books and spontaneous poetry orations got me into a bit of teasing. Some of my classmates teased me for being a nerd, others teased me for being soft and, yes, being gay. Most of the time, I think it was a combination of all of these things. But because I had self-assurance in truckloads—rather unusual for a child my age—I managed to brush all the teasing aside. I

knew I had the upper hand because the boys who teased me were also the ones who copied from me during our tests. As revenge, I would simply not allow them to copy. I remember thinking to myself that without my help, those brutes would surely drop out of school and become garbage collectors for the rest of their lives—children have such evil thoughts! So yes, I was teased, but in my own sly and subtle way, I learned to fight back. Ironically, fighting back meant wholeheartedly owning the odd traits, mannerisms, and characteristics for which I was being teased. Looking back, I understand this to be the genesis of pride. I have my upbringing to thank for this. It was our home's supportive environment that allowed me to grow up with strength and security of character, things I still carry with me today.

If I were to asses my juvenile forays into writing. I would say that I wrote because I had a whole lot of belief in my skills as a writer. In a rather conceited way, my early writing served to somewhat convince myself that I truly had the gift of writing. But of course, this approach has changed over time. In high school, new hobbies and interests came along my way. I became a member of the school's debate and volleyball teams. I still read a lot, but the writing took the form of essays required for school. I contributed a few sappy poems to the school's literary folio and still received praise from my English teachers. It was in my sophomore year as a literature major at the Ateneo de Manila University when I picked up writing again and decided to take it seriously.

I was fortunate to have had a run of the country's workshop circuit in my last two years of college. My first workshop was the Ateneo-Heights Writers Workshop. I submitted two stories to this workshop, one of which was received quite well, while the other was politely torn apart by the panelists. My stories were described as "gothic," "macabre" and "supernatural"; I blame this on the stories I was told on nights when we had no electricity. Overall, it was an encouraging experience for me. A year after that, I was accepted to the Iyas Creative Writing Workshop in Bacolod and then the Silliman National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete. In these two workshops, I learned that to write really meant subscribing to a set of rules. As a student of literature, I was familiar with formalism, including New Criticism, but I did not see the point of it all until these rules were applied quite rigorously in these workshops. Theory aside, my workshop-hopping summer was a lovely one, filled with writers, writing, and the sea.

During the workshop in Dumaguete, the beloved National Artist for Literature Edith Tiempo shared a little nugget of wisdom with me, which I only managed to understand later on. She particularly liked one of my stories, not for what was written on the page but for what she said the story was trying to say. She called it pathos.

My stories at that time had a lot of speculative elements, as some of them still do. But it was only after graduating from university, dealing with the death of loved ones, and experiencing the rote and dulling motions of adult life did I understand what she meant by pathos. To me, my stories seemed cool and daring because of the elements of horror and fantasy woven into them. But there was always this niggling feeling at the back of my head that told me that stories lacked a sense of honesty. As I tried to find my place in the daunting adult world, I felt a whole range of emotions—excitement, happiness, disappointment, anger, sadness, and joy, yet none of these seemed to translate onto the page.

I believe the breakthrough came when I worked in the media as a police-beat reporter. Although this was just a short stint, it allowed me to see the many harrowing and heartbreaking things that only people in the media have the privilege (or curse) of seeing. It was also at this time that I got involved in HIV advocacy work for the LGBT community, where I saw the darkness of fear and disease but also the light of laughter, friendship, and love. These two experiences served to underline the need for honesty in my writing. I felt like I was suddenly thrust in the middle of a swirling storm of emotions, belonging to myself, the people around me, and that large, amorphous thing called "the Filipino." The need to flesh these emotions out in my writing suddenly felt urgent.

I entered the creative writing program of the University of the Philippines to somehow give me the tools for this task. If asked today why I write, I would answer by saying that it is because I now have something to say. There is still a hint of that childish self-assurance in that statement, but the difference is that I have now lived a bit more and am hopefully wiser for it. I have also learned that honesty in writing is an important thing. As Toni Morrison says in her essay "The Site of Memory," a writer should always observe a sense of "fidelity to the milieu."[2] I take this to mean honoring the emotional truth of the lived experience—happiness,

2 Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Houghton Miffin Co., 1987), 92.

despair, anger, love, and yes, pathos—which, as I have learned, is the beating heart of all stories.

THE COMING-OF-AGE STORY: A THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING

As it is commonly understood, coming of age is defined as the specific instance in a child's life when he transitions from childhood to adulthood. When a child "grows up" or "comes of age," he is thought of as crossing a threshold; on the one hand, the child is still considered a child, while on the other, he is already considered an adult. When this threshold is crossed, the child undergoes a sudden, irrevocable change. This change is the stuff of the coming-of-age story.

Coming of age is an enduring theme in children's literature, young adult fiction (YA), and fiction written for adult readers. The coming-of-age theme is particularly prominent in YA because of the similarity in the ages of the YA character and the YA reader.[3] Despite the extensive body of scholarship in this field, there are still a lot of misconceptions about what can and cannot be considered YA.[4] Karen Coats notes that one major issue hampering a serious study of YA is the absence of clear lines demarcating the space it occupies.[5] By and large, critics have not arrived at a firm consensus as to where children's literature ends and YA begins. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the line that marks the end of YA and the beginning of adult fiction is equally as blurred.

A lot of factors contribute to a fictional work being considered (or not considered) YA. Some of these factors are textual—linguistic register, vocabulary, the age of the main character, the complexity of the theme—while others are extraneous to the text, such as the writer's intended readership versus the readership that his work actually enjoys. Furthermore, it must be underscored that fiction typically branded as YA is precisely that—*branded*, meaning publishers brand a book as YA through

3 While YA's prescribed reading age varies from publisher to publisher, the general consensus is that the YA reader is in between the ages twelve and eighteen. A typical element of YA literature is that the protagonist is also roughly around this age range and that the story unfolds through his or her point of view. One of the reasons behind the publishing success of YA is the immediate relatability YA literature establishes with its readership. See Fiona Dixon, "What Is Young Adult Fiction?" Professional Writing Academy, October 20, 2023, https://www.profwritingacademy.com/what-is-young-adult-fiction.

4 Victor Malo-Juvera and Crag Hill, "The Young Adult Canon: A Literary Solar System" in *Critical Explorations of Young Adult Literature: Identifying and Critiquing the Canon*, ed. Victor Malo-Juvera and Crag Hill (Routledge, 2022), 2.

5 Karen Coats, "Young Adult Literature: Growing Up, In Theory" in *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, ed. Shelby A. Wolf et al. (Routledge, 2011), 322.