

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 than 11 came from India—four of them all women from just one city, Chennai.

India is, of course, a much bigger country with much deeper literary traditions. But looking even internally, comparing the development of and our production in the novel to, say, the short story and poetry, it is abundantly clear that we are masters of the short rather than the long form. In the short story, we had 147 entries last year in the Palancas, and this year that figure was reportedly a more than respectable 130.

Not only are we writing few novels; we are writing very short ones, often 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. In its present form, *Soledad's Sister* is 194. A prodigious exception is Charlson Ong's 368-page *Banyaga* (2007).

What has kept most of us from writing more, longer, and bigger novels? In a talk before another conference late last year titled "Why We Don't Write More Novels, But Should", I advanced some of my own guesses toward answering this question, and let me recap those main points.

First, it doesn't pay, whether financially or psychically. While we may sleep, eat, defecate, and fornicate with our novels perched on our shoulders, the labor of many years won't even be enough to buy you an iPhone, if and when all your royalties come in. No one will stop you on the street, or throw their room keys and underwear at you, because you wrote a 500-page saga. For Jing Hidalgo (*Recuerdo* and *Book of Dreams*), the worst part of writing a novel is finding the time to write it; the second worst part, she says, "is knowing that after all that effort, hardly anyone was going to read it, including some of my own friends."

Second, we're still largely stuck on the *Noli* and *Fili* (don't you wonder why I named my protagonist Soledad, and why her nickname is Soli?), and many of us find it difficult to think of the novel as anything but history writ large, with a flaming revolution in the background and a love story in the foreground.

Third, novels traditionally demand sweeping views from the mountaintop, but we have very few mountaintops here in the Philippines. Instead we have become master pedestrians, or masters of the street scene, the close encounters for which the short story is the ideal medium. City-bred, we do not write about our forests and oceans. Our fictional space has become very small and very crowded, with a very low ceiling.

Unfortunately if also unfairly, no one will take us seriously on the global stage unless we announce ourselves with big, emphatic, memorable novels. 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.

We would be happy enough to be read here—or read here first—than in New York or London, but our countrymen would rather read John Grisham or J. K. Rowling or even Paul Coelho than us. Filipinos buy books—they just don't buy us. And why should we blame

them? 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.

This leads me to the writing of *Soledad's Sister*, which is not (or not yet, I should emphasize) the answer to my own prescription.

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 townsfolk. I didn't want to do 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 (here, a small-town cop and a karaoke-bar singer) in absurd situations and covering no more than a few days of real time.

I didn't realize, when I began it, how difficult it was going to be. I never write with a fixed plot in my head—I think that not knowing what happens next is the best part of writing—so even after a good start, and despite two generous fellowships to keep me going, I lost my way many times and wasted many thousands of words on false leads. Eventually it would take me eight years to finish this slim volume, working on and off, mostly off. Sixteen years would intervene between my first novel, *Killing Time in a Warm Place*, which was published, also by Anvil, in 1992. Between *Killing Time* and *Soledad's Sister*, I would also publish at least 13 other books, none of them a novel. It may be unfair to call those other books distractions or diversions, but in a sense that's what they were—a useful way, you might, say, to kill time before facing the inevitable.

In his book *On Becoming a Novelist*, John Gardner talks about how his inability or his refusal to finish his big novel allowed him to do many other smaller and more pleasurable things. "I myself have kept going for years by avoiding the one serious novel I mean to write someday," he says. "There it sits, five hundred rough-draft pages of it, watching me from its shelf like a skull. Nothing else I do is significant, by comparison, at least in my own mind. I am free to scatter words as an October wind scatters leaves."

I finished the novel (or its first full draft) out of sheer guilt and pride. In March last year, on a lark, I followed my friend Charlson Ong's example and submitted a 10,000-word section of my early draft to the inaugural Man Asian. I forgot about it for months until, early in July, I learned that it had been longlisted. My euphoria lasted only until I read the fine print of the rules, which required me to submit the full balance of the novel in less than two weeks, by July 15, if I wanted to make the short list of five finalists. For a few days I thought of shrugging my shoulders and telling myself that being longlisted was achievement enough; but I knew it was

a hollow honor, without a finished novel to show the international jury and, more importantly, my own people, never mind that they hardly read me and my fellow fictionists. Filipino flags and anthems began flying and playing in my head. So out of shame, I sent my classes off on take-home assignments, holed up with tubs of coffee and macaroni soup, and wrote 20,000 breathless words in one week, beating the Hong Kong deadline by a few hours.

The exultation of that effort shows, I think, in the product, but so does the strain. Novels shouldn't be written this way but this one did, at a certain cost in the flow and the texture of the narrative. I gave advance copies of the book to friends with the note that here was "my glorious mess of a novel," and it is.

It's no defense or excuse, but let me just say that if writing a first novel is difficult enough, writing a second one is even more so. A first novel is, as the cliché goes, obligatory; you need to get something out your system. With your second novel, you work with what's left, mindful not to repeat yourself but hoping for the same bursts of freshness and energy to sustain you. Often enough, it doesn't work; even your readers and critics don't expect it to.

In an article in *The Times* titled "Blood in the water: how sharks love the scent of second novels," author Celia Brayfield observes that "Love may be lovelier the second time around, but literature just turns ugly. Authors who take the no guts, no glory option, and push themselves to excess after a successful debut, get slaughtered for their courage.... Among writers, the rough ride awaiting the second-time novelist is known by the uninventive acronym of SNS (second novel syndrome) and acknowledged by its own literary award, the Encore Prize. Looking at past Encore winners, it can be deduced that a writer has a better chance of acclaim with a second novel if their first was no more than a modest hit, so they proceed with high ambition but low expectations."

I don't know how *Soledad's Sister* will rate beside *Killing Time*. At this point, I can't and don't particularly care, having more immediate things to worry about. Despite the launching of its first Philippine edition today, *Soledad's Sister* remains a novel in progress, and I remain a novelist in progress, tweaking the text for resubmission by my agent to foreign publishers. This matter of having and working with an agent is also a new experience for me and for other Filipino writers like Charlson, whom she also signed up, as it involves negotiating the line between what we want to say and what the uninitiated reader in the US or Europe needs to know. This edition of about 62,000 words represents what I think my Filipino reader can intuitively appreciate, but I expect and am prepared to write about 5,000 words more to expand certain sections of the novel. I'm trying my best not to resist revision, which every writer needs, but I can see where my propensity as a short story writer to be elliptical can clash with the demand on the novelist to reveal and explain everything.

I have no doubt that many readers will find this book confused, confusing, and incomplete. Of course to me it makes a kind of sense but a writer can never demand of a reader to see the same things the same way; one can only suggest. Let me make it easier for those who will not

like this novel by quoting the harshest comments my agent and I have so far received in a rejection letter from one publishing house, Albin Michel:

“The writer definitely has talent but I think at the moment he is working too hard at it. The first two chapters are crowded with images—at the airport, those families, grandmothers etc. who have no bearing on the main story and just crowd the landscape. Show, not tell yes, but too much detail can bore the reader. Just as the details about the rules concerning why trips were cancelled and telegrams sent... no bearing on the story and who cares? Just one line would have sufficed.

“When we meet Walter, the tone becomes much more self-assured and relaxed and the story takes off. There are some excellent scenes that follow. The problem is, this is a half-finished novel. The expected denouement fails to come. We don't know if the thief is caught, the corpse recovered and buried, we don't know what happens to the fledgling relationship between Walter and Rory. Instead we are given a clunky and somewhat unconvincing ending with Soledad. Not satisfying at all. I think the author must rethink the arc of the novel and I would like to take a look when and if he works it out. I think he needs a good editor. The reason I have written to you in such detail is because I think the writer has great potential. Albin Michel cannot make an offer at this time.”

I appreciate the candor of this reading and the fact that the reader sees great potential in me, but it also reveals how differently authors and publishers might feel about the same subject and its treatment. The details that matter to me don't matter to her at all, and vice-versa. Why should a thief need to get caught? Why should a body need to be buried? Why should a plot tie up the loose ends that life so often leaves?

So I will continue to work on *Soledad*, but I will draw the line at a closure I cannot see happening or do not find necessary. If that makes me more a writer of short fiction and less a novelist, then so be it.

I already know what my next novel will be. It will be the Great Filipino Melodrama—a madcap, chronological romp through all the clichés that keep us awake in these islands: natural disasters, family feuds, mother-daughter blues, land disputes, star-crossed love, illicit sex, rich gays boys and healthy provincial lasses, potbellied politicians, cheating husbands of hardworking DHs, and so on. I want to write a novel that even a high-schooler will understand and that producers will poison each other for the film rights. And then I will write a fourth novel that will have nothing to do, thematically and stylistically, with this third one.

As for *Soledad*, is it fair to be tinkering with the manuscript of a book that people will already be paying good money for and reading in their precious time? It doesn't happen often, but if a second edition can be better than the first, why not? To draw on more extreme and far loftier precedents, Goethe's *Faust* was written over 60 years. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* went through nine different editions, growing from just 12 poems in the original 1855 edition to the 293 poems of the so-called “deathbed” edition of 1892. For all we know, the international

version I'm working on may be less satisfying than this one—or maybe not, so expect me to invite you to another launch in the future.