# BUILDING A BRIDGE BETWEEN "HARD LITERATURE" AND "POP FICTION"

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

Like most Filipino writers whom I know, I got my start as a writer in the campus press, first in high school, then in college. And, like most of my contemporaries I dreamed of a career in journalism—writing for the national newspapers and magazines, since, in those days, there was only print journalism. Creative writing programs, and even creative writing courses didn't exist.

The University of Santo Tomas, my alma mater, offered a degree in Journalism (a curriculum which included the new fields of Advertising and Public Relations). In the same faculty which taught Journalism (the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, or Philets), it also offered a Bachelor of Philosophy (with a curriculum which included many Literature subjects). I chose Philosophy even if I had no idea what profession a degree in Philosophy prepared one for, mainly because I wanted to take all those Literature courses.

In high school, while writing for and eventually editing *The Paulinian*, I began to contribute feature articles to several national magazines (all unfortunately short-lived). As a sophomore in college, while writing for and eventually editing *The Varsitarian*, I wrote a weekly column in the youth section of the *Manila Chronicle*; and as a senior, I became editor of the youth section of the *Weekly Graphic*. So, when I graduated from college, I considered myself a professional journalist.

But what I really wanted to be was a writer of short stories; and, of course, I wanted to win a Palanca. This didn't come easily to me. It was essays that I wrote, and the Palanca Awards then did not include the essay category. My best friend had already won a Palanca for her poetry while still an undergraduate. But I hadn't even published a story! And when she was invited to be part of the first Writers' Workshop in Silliman, and I wasn't, I was devastated.

By the time my first short story was published, I was 25, married and a mother. When I won my first Palanca, my husband had accepted a

job with UNICEF, and we were living in Beirut. The news got to me in a letter from my mother, sent via diplomatic pouch by UNICEF in Manila to UNICEF in Beirut. Tony was out of the country, and my eldest daughter was in school. So the only one I could share my big news with was my second daughter, Anna, who was around 4 years old. I said to her: "Anna, guess what, I won a prize for my story—I got third prize." She thought about that for a moment, and then, she said, "Gee, Ma, you have to try harder next time."

I have another favorite Palanca memory. It happened in this very room on Palanca Night. I was here with my husband, Tony. Either he or I had served as judge for one of the categories. A young man came up to greet us—it was the late Luis Katigbak, then still an undergraduate in the Creative Writing Program of the University of the Philippines then. He looked rather self-conscious in his dark suit. I had only ever seen him in t-shirts and jeans, so I almost didn't recognize him. We congratulated him for his prize, and he shook our hands, gave us a wide smile, and a little bow. After he had left us, Tony said to me, "That's the look and the swagger of a writer who has just won his first Palanca. Recognize it?"

And every Palanca Night since, I have seen that look and that swagger in some of the young writers in attendance. But now and again, I've wondered: how long will this last? The question I'm asking is not how long will the Palanca Awards last. I'm asking how long will writers keep on wanting and trying to produce the kind of writing that wins a Palanca award?

We all know that in the different branches of the country's biggest bookstore chain, what few shelves are devoted to books are not occupied by literary titles written by Filipino writers. Of course, these days, the question that follows naturally on that one is: but what do we mean by that term "literary title"?

A few months ago, at a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Book Development Association of the Philippines (BDAP), I heard another term used for the first time: "hard literature." I learned that, in the publishing world, the term has replaced the earlier term, "serious literature." As a writer, and a reader, my own definition of "serious literature" is literature that is carefully crafted, literature that seeks to explore ideas which the writer feels strongly about, literature that is written, not just to share experiences, but to offer insights about its subject. In other words, literature which has a chance of winning a Palanca award.

But at that meeting I am referring to, the speaker (himself a very successful local publisher, Mr. Jun Matias of Precious Pages and Lampara Books) made a pitch for Filipino publishers to be more open—not just to "hard literature"—but to all forms of writing. There is so much of it being produced now, he said, so many young people wanting to share their stories, and so many people wanting to read them, that publishers who choose to continue to ignore it, or "judge" it—by which he meant, look down on it—run the risk of being left behind. This made me sit up.

Jun then showed us a brief video of one of his authors—a Wattpad writer—arriving for a "meetup." This writer's fans were so numerous that they didn't fit into the room or hall that had been prepared for the occasion, and the publisher had to open another one to accommodate them. When she arrived, the author was received like a rock star—with screams and shrieks and wild applause. And she looked the part too—young and slim with straight long hair, her face partly hidden by huge shades.

Another publisher later told me that her company has been in an arrangement with Wattpad since 2014, to turn selected Wattpad novels into print novels. One of these, *She's Dating a Gangster* by Bianca Bernardino became, not just an National Bookstore bestseller, but the first Wattpad novel to be turned into a movie (by Star Cinema, with Kathryn Bernardo and Daniel Padilla in the lead roles).

This publisher also informed me that their most popular writer, Jonaxx, is so big that the company has created an imprint just for her. Her real name is Jonah Mae Panen Pacala; she's 28 years old and a pre-school teacher from Cagayan de Oro. According to her fan page she is the first Filipina Wattpad author to gain one million followers. Last year, that figure went up to 2.7M+. And her fans are so fiercely devoted to her that they object to her novels' being changed in any way, including correcting grammar and syntax. *Mapapansin Kaya?* the first of her books to be published, had a print run of 40,000. This may not seem like an impressive figure in New York City, but in Manila, it is quite astonishing. As of this writing, seven of Jonaxx's books have been published in print so far. She joined Wattpad in 2012. By 2018, she had published 32 novels. Actually, my initial reaction to the Wattpad phenomenon when I first heard of it was astonishment. I had no idea that so many people wanted to write fiction. But, then again, why not?

Looking back on my own teen years… didn't I, too, want to write stories? I began writing stories because I loved reading them. I'm talking about novels like *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables* and *Daddy-Long-Legs* and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*; and later, the Nancy Drew series and the Beverly Gray series—in short, what today are called "YA novels." My world was a small one. My parents were conservative and kept me at home most of the time. To use a hoary cliché, reading books opened doors for me, doors into other, larger, worlds.

When I first tried to write stories, I was a pre-teen. I simply wanted to imitate the stories I had read. The heroines in those stories had adventures; they fell in love. And they wanted to be writers! They became my role models. My writing—like my reading—was not so much for self-expression or sharing with others. It was a form of escape, an escape from a life I considered boring and humdrum.

But I outgrew those stories. There was something predictable about their plots, and about their characters, principally, the little orphan girl, neglected and deprived of love, but gifted with a vivid imagination. After various mishaps, some painful, some hilarious, she transforms into a strong-minded, large-hearted, confident, accomplished, and lovely young woman; and of course finds a young man worthy of her.

So, I moved on to Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, to Mark Twain and Harper Lee, to Charles Dickens and the writer who wrote *Silas Marner*. I discovered Nick Joaquin and Kerima Polotan and Carmen Guerrero Nakpil. I realized I was no longer reading just for escape. Without fully realizing what I was looking for, I just knew I was looking for something else, for something more.

My writing began to change as well. I showed these new essays and stories to my English teachers and the school paper adviser. When they edited these, or wrote comments on the margins, I did not take this as an infringement on my freedom. Neither did any of my classmates. We took it as an effort to help us become better writers. And we were grateful.

Anyway, this whole process simply meant that I was growing up as a person. And that I was developing as a writer.

Today, I ask myself: if the Net had existed when I was a teen-ager, and had it been possible to post my scribblings on an app like Wattpad, without the benefit of comments or suggestions from teachers or more

experienced writers; had I acquired a huge following, and my stories been turned into printed books, which would sell copies in the thousands, or perhaps even in the hundreds of thousands… if these things had happened to me, would I have chosen to stop writing girlish romances, and moved on to other subjects, and other ways of writing? What would have been the reason for doing so?

It has occurred to me that this may well be the situation some of the Wattpad writers find themselves in. They're already successful. What else do they need to do? In particular, why do they need to go to college and study writing?

Actually, I know people—some of them, writers—who believe that one does not have to get a degree in creative writing to become a writer. And that is certainly true. National Artists Nick Joaquin, NVM Gonzalez, Francisco Arcellana didn't have degrees in Creative Writing. National Artists Bienvnido Lumbera, Virgilio Almario, and Frankie Sionil Jose don't have degrees in creative writing. And, as I said earlier, neither do I.

The establishment of Creative Writing as an academic discipline is relatively new (unlike the B.A. in Fine Arts and the B.A. in Music, which have been around for more than a century). But why would anyone discourage young writers from wanting to get degrees in creative writing?

The myth seems to be that a formal education in writing will "destroy" your natural, instinctive talent. And, perhaps, there ARE some teachers out there whose methods may, in fact, have a negative effect on their students. But doesn't this happen in all fields, be they the arts, the natural sciences, or the social sciences? Whatever one's chosen field, one will encounter good teachers and bad teachers; there will be teachers whom one will find boring but whom others will find inspiring, and vice versa.

I tell my own students that, at some point, they should become pro-active, and choose the mentor they feel is the best suited to their own temperaments, someone they admire and trust and feel they can work with. Such a mentor cannot harm them; in fact, he or she, is more likely to be a great help to them.

I've said this often before: writing is a profession like any other. One trains to become a professional. It is accepted as natural that people in the other arts, like painting or sculpture should wish to enroll in a College of Fine Arts, and musicians should wish to enter a Conservatory of Music.

And, certainly, the more highly skilled they are, the bigger their chances of selling their works via the great international auction houses or doing solo performances to the accompaniment of great symphony orchestras. Why should it be any different for literature?

Of course writers who don't want to get a university education don't have to get it. But if they're serious about making writing their career—if they wish to be professional writers—they need some form of training, even if it be self-training. All training requires hard work, but this kind of training—self-training—even more so.

One learns any skill, first, by imitating those who know how to do it. Even child prodigies—like Tiger Woods, who was playing golf when he was two years old—took golf lessons, from his father, first of all. Even gifted musicians—like the band Queen, and its brilliant front man Freddie Mercury—have acknowledged the influence on their work of other rock stars, whom they respected, and whose music they spent time studying: Elvis Presley, David Bowie, Jimi Hendrix.

When the UST Center for Creative Writing invited Ely Buendia to speak at a forum on song writing, I asked him what he thought had led to the Eraserheads' great success. He said he didn't know, but he also told me that he had admired many other musicians, had studied them, and tried to incorporate those influences into his music. He mentioned, in particular, Elvis Presley (who, in turn, had been influenced by African American blues, southern country music, and gospel music). And he mentioned our own folk songs, which he said he had also studied.

To return to what I was saying earlier: what would be the incentive of the phenomenally popular and commercially successful Wattpad writer to raise the level of her writing skills, and take on concerns larger than first love or first heartbreak?

Actually, I know someone who has done just that. Perhaps some of you will recognize the name Charmaine M. Lasar. She's a 20-year-old Wattpad writer, who won the Carlos Palanca award for the novel in Filipino in 2015. She has been quoted to the effect that she joined the Palanca literary contest because she "wanted to refute the idea that only garbage comes out of Wattpad." But she also added that, in writing her 35,000-word novel, *Toto-O*, which she claims to have written in just one month, she "consciously deviated from her Wattpad writing style, which is looser and more carefree," and opted

to write something that was "medyo malalim" in terms of language." Also, its plot has nothing to do with young love or young heartbreak.

The novel was published in 2016 by JumpMedia. And last year, Maine was accepted by the UP Institute of Creative Writing as a writing fellow for its National Writers' Workshop. I met her there, and she told me she was considering saving up to enroll for a Creative Writing degree. I salute her, and I salute the Palanca Awards for giving her the recognition she deserved.

Her crossover is proof that the two worlds—the world of pop fiction and the world of hard literature—are not mutually exclusive.

Back in 1999, after retiring from government service, my husband (who, in one of his earlier incarnations, had also been a poet, an essayist, and a journalist), set up a small publishing company that he ran pretty much by himself. He had in mind two lines: information books, and literature. But when he found out how small the print run of most literary titles was, he was shocked. Why, he asked me, would I go to all that trouble and use up all that time and energy in writing a novel or a collection of short stories or essays, if only a thousand people were going to read me?

He was determined to publish books that would appeal to larger audiences, and he decided that the way to do that was to produce short, light, nonfiction books, targeting readers in their 20s and 30s; books which would be accessible, without losing their literary quality, and books in both English and Filipino. Many of the writers he published were first-time authors, like Vlad Gonzalez, Carljoe Javier, Rica Bolipata Santos; but he also published writers who already had something of a name, like Marivi Soliven Blanco, and Luis Katigbak; and award-winning writers like Butch Dalisay, Vince Groyon, and Chris Martinez. The award winners were not averse to trying their hand at writing that would have a more popular appeal.

Milflores books did well in terms of sales. A few did exceptionally well. And some of the Miflores books also won awards, like Rica Bolipata Santos' *Love, Desire, Children, Etc.*, which won the Madrigal Gonzalez Best First Book Award.

I should also mention Summit Books, which introduced Chick-Lit to young Filipinas with a novella by Tara Sering titled, *Getting, Better* in 2002. It was a kind of market test, to see if there was a local reading public for chick literature which was a big thing in the UK and the US. The novella

was packaged along with *Cosmopolitan Philippines* October 2002 issue. So it was a freebie with a print run of 57,000 copies, the magazine's circulation for that month. The results were so good that a sequel was immediately planned and Summit Books was set up with Tara Sering as its head. By 2005, it had already published eight books.

To quote Diane Goodman, associate professor at Allegheny College and herself a chick lit author, "Chick-Lit is hip, stylish, confident and sharp—it's also honest and very brave… And it proves itself structurally, lyrically, and formally as literature." She described it as "the new fiction in much of its form and voice and content, proudly on the edge of the genre—making use of standard fiction practices within original reinvented forms that accommodate new messages, meanings."[1]

The Pinay counterpart of Chick-Lit was different from that model because of the differences in culture, and because of its author profile. All Pinay Chick-Lit authors had received formal training in creative writing or literature or both, from top universities. Some either had MAs or were currently enrolled in graduate schools. They had all written "serious literature," and all wrote in English.

Sering's novel was a delightful read—quick, clean prose, sure of itself and of its desired effects, fast-paced, sassy, sophisticated, and wildly funny. It succeeded in turning what was originally very western material into something unmistakably *Pinoy*. And, behind the humor was sly criticism of the world it depicted—the guys and chicks of the corporate world who think they're so cool. In short, it was satire. This was recognized by critics (yes, Chick-Lit was noticed by critics in media and even in academe). Ronald S. Lim of the *Manila Bulletin*, wrote that Sering's third novel, *Before Dinner and the Morning After* was "more about female empowerment than romance or anything else. It's about knowing what you're worth and having the courage to take risks to get what you want."[2]

Nor were other members of the literary establishment—like the Manila Critics' Circle—averse to granting Chick-Lit admission into the category of "literature." Sering's second novel, *Almost Married* received a National Book Award for Best Young Adult Fiction.

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1 Goodman, Diane. What is Chick Lit. http://www.electronicbooksreview.com. 2005.

2 See Hidalgo, Cristina Pantoja. Endnote #10, "Genre Fiction, Pinay Style," *Over a Cup of Ginger Tea: Conversations on the Literary Narratives of Filipino Women*. (UP Press, 2006, p. 96).

But I don't think Chick-Lit is still flourishing today.

Today, we have Visprint Publishing, which is doing something similar, but on a much larger scale. Some of the writers whom Nida Ramirez publishes are actually academics, like Chuckberry Pascual, Joselito Delos Reyes, and John Jack Wigley. All three have written "hard literature." All have won awards for their writing. But Nida has chosen to publish their lighter work. Visprint books are small, inexpensive, light, humorous. Nida has also published the speculative fiction of Eliza Victoria and the graphic fiction of Manix Abrera. Actually, none of Visprint's titles are sleepers. And some have won literary awards too. In fact, in 2015, Visprint received a National Book Award as Publisher of the Year, a prize which goes to the publisher with the biggest number of winning titles for that year.

So Visprint would seem to represent the happy bridge between the commercially successful book and the artistically lauded book, proving, yet again, that these are not incompatible.[3]

In that sense, this is actually a very exciting time for writers. There have never been so many choices available, including what would have been mind-boggling for me and my contemporaries: self-publishing online.

Before making those choices, though, writers need to figure out a few things. First, what kind of books do they want to write? Second, what kind of writers do they want to be, or think they can be? Do they mainly want to entertain readers, or to challenge them intellectually, or to influence them politically? Do they want to make as much money as they can? Or do they want to write in the best way they know how? Or do they want to try and do both? And, finally, how do they want their books distributed—by commercial publishers? by academic publishing houses? by themselves, online and in small expos?

These choices will be determined by what they believe the function of literature is in a country like ours, at the time in which we live, and what role they want to play in it as writers.

Because I am a writer who is also a publisher, I understand the need to be commercially viable. But, as an educator, I also believe that public service is an important responsibility of the publishing industry. And this means recognizing that expanding the market for books is important, not just for bigger profits, but because more educated citizens make more mature

3 As of this writing, Visprint has closed. But it has been replaced by Avenida Books.

citizens—an indispensable element for any experiment in democracy, like ours.

In concrete terms, this means: on the one hand, accepting the level at which most of our reading public is—what it is willing to read, what it enjoys reading—and, on the other hand, committing at least a part of the resources available to producing books which will upgrade standards and tastes.

Personally, I remain committed to writing in the best way I know how, no matter how small the audience for this kind of writing might be. Because I feel that literature of this sort—"hard literature," if you will—serves its own purpose.

In another essay,[4] I wrote about this: "Writers of all generations have tried to define that purpose. But there are periods in our history when it becomes startlingly clear. The period we live in today, in this country, is one of them—one of those periods when events, both natural and man-made, conspire to drain one of all hope that better times lie ahead."

I mentioned the book, *Sonoran Desert Summer*, by John Alcock, professor of Zoology at Arizona State University, where he describes June in the desert as "the month of almost no hope for all living creatures, with the temperature at 102 degrees, rainfall at two-tenths of an inch, and a wind that has removed almost every hint of moisture from the desert world." He calls it "a time for hanging on, enduring, letting the days pass."

And then, he describes how, suddenly… "from the boulders on the still shaded lower slope of Usery Mountain comes a song, the clear, descending trill of a canyon wren. Loud, defiant, and encouraging, it announces a survivor... (The bird) bounds from rock to rock, at perfect ease in its home in the desert."

Sometimes I think that this might be the reason we do it, the reason we keep on writing. This is our song, "defiant and encouraging."

As writers, we all know that we must stay the course, most particularly in bleak times such as those that confront us now. We will not necessarily agree on what we are called upon to do, but we will do it according to our best lights. We will observe, we will record, we will protest. Above all, we will remember. And we will endure.

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4 Hidalgo, Cristina. 2017-2018. "Introduction," *Tomás: The Journal of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies*. Vol. 2, Issue 5, 1st Term, 2014-2015, pp. ix-x.

(Originally delivered as a speech on the occasion of the author's having received the Gawad Dangal ng Lahi, given by the ***Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature*** on November 8, 2019, at the Manila Peninsula.)