

Diyos ti Agngina, Manong: A Tribute to F. Sionil Jose

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I had just returned from several years of working on overseas secondment when I read *Po-on*. The novel made me feel that I had truly come home. Between its pages lived people I remembered from my youth: frugal, hardworking, sun-baked Ilocanos who wrestled a living out of an inhospitable land. It made me a bit sad too, because though set in the 1880s, a lot of the struggles of *Po-on's* characters were still too real more than a century later.

When I met the author F. Sionil Jose a few years after, I was understandably nervous and fan-girling a bit (okay, a lot). But who wouldn't be? He was a National Artist for Literature, founder of the Philippine PEN, and the most widely translated Filipino author. Yet to my surprise, he turned out to be down-to-earth, witty, and encouraging to young writers. In my case, I was young only in terms of creative writing because by then, I was on early retirement from a corporate job. As a bonus, we both spoke Ilocano, so I was saved from getting a nose bleed as we talked.

I joined PEN and discovered why Manong Frankie's novels were so transporting. He was a natural storyteller. He spoke with zeal when he talked about literature and our country, and with amused nostalgia when recalling his younger days.

Once, I asked him about the time he was tagged as a US spy. He chuckled at the memory. He said that the incident happened right after he returned from a trip to Russia. He was quite worried that the accusation would lead to the bankruptcy of La Solidaridad, which he considered his bread and butter. To his amazement, people flocked to the bookstore instead.

The Russian posters that he brought home were snapped up faster than he could say *Dos Vedanya*. To top it all, he won a libel suit against the local columnist who had labeled him a spy.

Of course, as a writer, Manong Frankie could not help but practice one of a spy's skills—that of keen observation. He admitted though that he would not make a good spy because he was afraid of pain. “Prick my skin and I will tell you everything! But I will not remember who gave me the information. They can kill me and still, I could not reveal the name,” he said. I can still recall him clapping his thigh with a guffaw.

On a more serious note, he believed that one of the greatest responsibilities of a Filipino writer is to make Filipinos remember. He wrote for us his countrymen so that we would remember. For as he said, “Memory continues to be our strongest and firmest anchor to Filipinas.”

Like Jose Rizal before him, Manong Frankie placed his hope in the youth to bring the country out of what he perceived to be a quagmire of corruption and injustice.

I also enjoyed hearing about Manong's love story. It had so many “kilig” moments that it was like listening to a romantic audiobook. He fell in love at first sight with a *colegiala*, the lovely Teresita Jovellanos, whose lineage could be traced back to one of Jose Rizal's Ateneo friends. Their first encounter was one of those “meet-cute” incidents when they almost missed getting introduced, because the female lead was leaving a party just as the male lead arrived, rushing from a writing assignment. That near-miss and the wide social divide between the barrio lad and the *colegiala*, plus their subsequent elopement, were the hallmarks of a romantic movie. Of course, Manong Frankie told it so much better than I ever could.

Their love story continued to their ripe old age. Manang Tessie was his first reader, sometimes reading over his shoulder as he typed his manuscript. He described her as a very strong and caring woman who supported and fought for him. Sometimes she would upbraid him for not being diplomatic enough.

If diplomacy was not Manong Frankie's strong suit, generosity with time, talent, and treasure certainly was. This generosity was shared by Manang Tessie. I feel so privileged that he took time out of his packed schedule to read my short story collections and in keeping with his name, offered frank comments. He also encouraged me to write a longer piece

of work. He attended my book launches even if it meant battling Manila's traffic. He did these for other writers too, attesting to a heart brimming with kindness and generosity.

It is fitting that the boy who spent his days astride a *carabao* in the fields of Cabugawan had become a National Artist, and garner numerous awards, including the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Literature, Journalism, and Creative Communication, as well as the Pablo Neruda Centennial Award. He had also been decorated by the Emperor of Japan, the French Government, and the European Union. In 2019, he was elected as International Vice President of PEN International, a much deserved recognition of his years spent promoting literature and defending freedom of speech. His work had been praised nationally and internationally for its searing social realism. He credited his experience of growing up in poverty for the authenticity of his work.

Manong Frankie had been called a peregrine, a pilgrim, and a spy among others. But for me, he will always be Manong, which in Ilocano means older brother, someone who despite his numerous achievements and immense contributions to Philippine Literature supported and encouraged those of us who were younger and not as accomplished as he was.

Dios ti agngina, Manong.