

# F. Sionil Jose and Me

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Geraldine C. Maayo

I was 34 years old, fresh from the Silliman Writers' workshop that summer of '79. Jessie—my workshop best friend—and I walked into the Solidaridad Bookshop, giggling like teenagers, our minds heady from the memories of the recently finished workshop; of the excitement of three weeks with writers and would-be writers, etc. We babbled about our Silliman sojourn, specifically about the men who captured our attention and our hearts, all this while browsing through the countless books so meticulously arranged in long, numerous shelves, making us swoon, wanting to get all of them, buy them, take most of them with us... when a voice cut into our chatty, girly conversation and said, in a rather thunderous and yet sweet voice, "So, you ladies just came from the workshop, so you are writers? Ok, I'm inviting you to come to this Saturday's meeting of the PEN."

That was 1979, the start of a long relationship with the man, and an almost consistent, steady relationship with PEN, the writers' organization whose Philippine branch F. Sionil Jose founded.

So we went to the weekly meetings, as well as to the monthly meetings, and the always exciting annual PEN conference, attending receptions for visiting writers, their lectures, the open fora for the Q and A. I was introduced to the world of the Philippine literati—the poets, essayists, novelists, journalists, the published and the unpublished. From 1979 to 2019—the last meeting I attended, held at the National Museum—I would attend the annual conference of PEN. But there were certain years in the middle '90s when my teaching schedule conflicted with the conference dates. The other factor being the practice Philippine PEN started around that time to hold the annual conference in the regions, Baguio, Bicol, etc., and we were, if I remember right, supposed to shoulder our own travel expenses to the conference.

The regional Asian conferences were the ones I found more exciting, for there were writer delegates from other countries.

PEN, I saw as family, especially those first ten years. I was an unknown writer who had won a literary award for fiction, and, in a matter of two years, was able to have my first book published. It was absolutely so beyond my dreams as a 21-year old, suffering a boring job and desperate to write.

I looked up to, admired, and respected the senior members who were also the members of the board of PEN: S.P. Lopez, Armando Malay, (Salvador Roxas Gonzales, De La Salle), Virgilio Almario, Mauro Avena, Nina Estrada Puyat, Lina Espina Moore, Estie Juco, Estrella Alfon, Gilda Cordero-Fernando, Lilia Ramos de Leon, Ines Taccad Cammayo.

FSJ had a one-on-one close relationship with the members, whom he treated as family. I was one of them, young as I was then. In retrospect, I did not know then what an important thing it was that happened in my life, in my 34<sup>th</sup> year, so fresh from the first and only writing workshop I was ever able to attend.

Those early years I got this feeling that I was some kind of *niña bonita* in FSJ's eyes. Maybe because I was attending almost all the meetings, even the special ones, the weekly ones, and definitely, the obligatory monthly meetings. Solidaridad was a single ride away from my place, taking only about 20 to 30 minutes. I particularly remember the special occasions at the PEN, specifically when the Joses hosted a visiting poet, journalist or novelist, who would usually deliver a lecture. We PEN members were the audience, and were expected to participate in a stimulating intellectual exchange.

In the early days, I would have Jessie with me, walking in M.H. del Pilar where we got our respective rides.

FSJ would call me at home. Everyone had a PLDT landline then. I remember his voice on the phone, and his sweetly demanding tone: "Geraldine, what are you doing? Why don't you come by and let's have coffee?"

We had several of these coffee-and-*ensaymada* dates—walking the short distance from Soli to Hizon Cafe—and all the while, he would be expounding on whatever would be either occupying his mind, or simply random thoughts. It must have been there where he expounded on certain literary ideas about my writing. And it must have been there where I casually asked the hypothetical question: "Sir, how does one get published?" This was

a few months after the Silliman workshop, and a flurry of stories had come out from my pen. These were published in national magazines one after another. His answer was a question: “*Bakit hija, ilan na ba nasulat mo?*”

I said: “Nine.”

He said: Give them to me.”

It turned out he was a reader for New Day Publishers.

In a year’s time, I had my first book, He was out of the country during the launching. Tessie Jose practically did everything for the launching of my book.

I recall visiting him in Baguio, where he would be doing his writing at Vallejo Hotel. I can’t remember how he got to know I would be in Baguio teaching one or two courses that summer, but he invited me to drop by and see him at the hotel where he would be cooped up doing his own writing. He found it difficult to write in Manila. It was an afternoon, overcast as most days are in Baguio. I went to his room and found him sitting on his desk, his typewriter in front of him, his hands on the keys. On another table were rows and rows of printouts, sheets of oily-looking paper with smudgy pale indigo-blue, printouts of what he had obviously finished.

“Here I am,” he said, as though to say: “Here is how I am, how I look when I work, when I write.”

I don’t remember how long I stayed, but I remember a scene: the two of us crossing the width of Session Road—for coffee and more talk. I don’t remember the cafe.

I don’t remember specifically what we talked about. Frankie was a man who was talking most of the time. And I was a forever-curious student of writing and literature. It’s possible it was during this tête-a-tête where I must’ve asked what he thought about what some people have observed about the prevailing theme of sadness in my stories. His answer, not the question I asked, is what I clearly remember: “Remember, Geraldine, that all great works of literature have a tinge of sadness in them.” How right he was. A slew of writers immediately came to my mind: Dostoevsky, Mann, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Flaubert, etc.

I have in my hard disk files, in the folder “Literary,” a page where I have encoded the pointers, advice, observations FSJ gave me in the course of our conversations: (1.) That my second book should be an absolute

improvement of the first; (2.) That my characters are so bourgeois— that I should write of proletariat themes, of the common people, like a bus conductress, a waitress. This pissed me off. Weren't we supposed to write of things we knew? I asked him that. I didn't know anything about the lives of waitresses, bus conductresses, etc. His answer was, as usual, quick and abrupt: "Research them, *hija*, study them." I'd hit back: Aren't we supposed to write of things we are most familiar with? Our own milieu? He reiterated that I must research on their lives. This was his favorite topic—the poor vs. the rich. And he was inflicting it on me. After a first book. Which he himself recommended. I don't know if he realized how I'd written on the subject of the struggling poor, of beggars in the street scrounging for food, under the heat of the sun, entering bus stop restaurants on highways, scrounging for left-overs from tables yet to be cleared.

He was not around when my book was launched at his bookstore. Mam Tessie took care of everything. I remember showing him a nice letter from the American owner of The Cellar Bookshop in Michigan praising my book, specifically the dialogues—"the best dialogues he has ever read in a month of Sundays, from a Filipina writer. And I remember the smile on his face as he teased me: "Now, you can die." A hyperbole.

I think those first five years—'79 to '84—were the years that we were closest. I surmise that he liked me for being a PEN regular, for unfailingly going to the meetings, whether they be the regular meetings or the special meetings or receptions for visiting writers of other nations.

In 2007, after not attending so many PEN conferences of the previous years, I decided to attend that year's annual conference, because the venue happened to be UST, not quite far from my place, the nearest among all the venues for the past 43 years. Looking up the stairs, I saw several familiar faces: he, Tessie, my former Professor Elmer Ordoñez, Bien Lumbera. Climbing the stairs, he greeted me with: "They were all asking who you were; and I said that's Geraldine." There was pride in his voice as he said it. My heart leapt with joy. He remembered me, and was proud of it.