

Tribute to an Old Friend

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I met Frankie Sionil Jose when I was still an undergraduate Philosophy major in UST. Frankie was already Frankie, and *Solidaridad* was already *Solidaridad*. But he made my friend Rita, and me feel welcome.

So, after getting our regular allowances from the *Varsitarian*, we would make a trip to Padre Faura and scour the shelves for those books we could only find in Soli.

I recall finding the novels of Pramoedya Ananta Toer and the *Letters of a Javanese Princess* by Kartini there, when no one else we knew had even heard of them. And Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. And the poems of Apollinaire and Yevtushenko.

After graduation, Rita became Frankie's Assistant in the literary journal *Solidarity*. I was an instructor in UST. My boyfriend, who was teaching in UP, would fetch me after our classes, and we would go to *Solidarity's* office, on top of the bookstore, and hang out with Frankie and Tessie, and whichever writer friends of theirs happened to be visiting. It was exciting! It felt like our own version of Paris' Left Bank.

Later, Rita's boyfriend would come for her, and the four of us would have dinner in one of the many small cafés in Ermita—maybe Guernica's—and then go for drinks in one of the tiny bars, like Taboy, which had a blind pianist.

The years of student activism and the imposition of martial law changed all our lives.

In 1975, Tony accepted a position with UNICEF, and we left the country. But, on our regular home leaves, we would sometimes drop in to

say hello to Frankie and Tessie. Frankie would ask us about the literature in whichever country we were living. And, if I recall correctly, he inevitably knew a couple of writers in every country we mentioned.

Tony and I returned to Manila for good in 1990, and were delighted to discover that Frankie was still holding forth in a *Solidaridad* that looked exactly as it did when we first found it. The first thing Frankie did, after welcoming us back, was urge us to reactivate our membership with PEN. That was easy to do. The Board members were all old friends of ours: Elmer Ordoñez, Lito Zulueta, Shirley Lua, Charlson Ong...

Over the years we have remained good friends. We may have sometimes disagreed on political issues, and have sometimes been taken aback by his peremptory ways. But never did we experience anything but support and encouragement from Frankie.

In the last decade or so, most bookstores have stopped carrying literary titles, preferring to crowd their shelves with waptopad novels and horror comics. Not *Solidaridad*, though. In these shelves, literature, especially Philippine literature, occupies pride of place. If only for this service, Frankie is owed the gratitude of Filipino writers. And this is not even to mention the formidable body of his works.

When Tony set up Milflores Publishing, Frankie was ready with advice on the running of a small publishing house. One time, he stunned Tony by saying, "Better still, why don't you just take over my place? I'm not getting any younger, you know." We wondered, then, if Frankie was actually thinking of selling *Solidaridad*. Surely not! It must have been a joke. After all, he knew there was no way Tony could have possibly bought it.

When I became director of the UP Press, Frankie suggested that I recruit more UP writers to become part of PEN. "You are so many good writers there," he said to me. "PEN needs you. Tell them they are welcome here." And when I became director of the UST Publishing House, and later, of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, *Solidaridad's* doors were always open to us. Frankie was always willing to host our book launches, even when the books were by young writers whom he did not personally know.

Actually, I think my *Collected Stories and Tales* (UST, 2019) may have been one of the last books to be launched at Solidaridad in 2020, before the pandemic struck.

So, for that last gift, and for the friendship of more than five decades, *maraming, maraming salamat*, Frankie. And Godspeed.

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