

Manong Frankie: The Writerly Grandfather I Never Had

Ralph Semino Galán

I come from a family of businessmen and tradespeople, policemen and military officers, office workers and sales agents, and some lazybones and inveterate gamblers, with a few teachers here and there to infuse the bloodline with intellectual pursuits. But my bibliophilia is still a bit of an anomaly, despite my Mom being an English teacher, who had encouraged me to read at a very early age—perhaps at two or three years old.

Since discovering the pleasure of reading, and a few years later, the joy of writing, I have always been inseparable from books, oftentimes reading in the dark, literally under the sheets, with a flashlight as my reading lamp. I remember being constantly reprimanded by my late Dad—who used to manage, first a printing press, then a logging company, then finally a small business that rented out air compressors—for reading late at night, sometimes up to the wee hours of the morning. “Too much reading will destroy your eyes,” he warned.

But his prohibition did not dissuade me from exploring other worlds, other lives, which are so different from mine: more exhilarating, more magical, more action-filled. So it comes as no surprise that I first encountered Manong Frankie through one of his books, the novel *Ermita* in particular.

I learned about Ermi Rojo’s life story in the late 1980s, when the novel received a positive review in *Time Magazine* no less—a full-page synopsis and assessment of its literary and extra literary merits, if my memory serves me right. I was only sixteen or seventeen at that time, and the

only other Filipino novels that I had read back then were Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. Manong Frankie's *Ermita* was the third novel I read written by a Filipino fictionist, followed closely by Stevan Javellana's *Without Seeing the Dawn* and Alfred A. Yuson's *The Great Jungle Energy Cafe*.

I remember that I enjoyed reading *Ermita*. It reminded me of three of the four novels that I had chosen to read and review for my literature class under Mrs. Corazon Dadufalza in Philippine Science High School. These novels, like *Ermita*, had narratives that were not only well-written but gripping as well, albeit tragic in the end: Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

I would only get to meet Manong Frankie in person, or face-to-face, to use current pandemic parlance, some five years later, when the writing fellows of the 2nd ASEAN Writers' Conference/Workshop on Poetry visited his Solidaridad Bookshop located on Padre Faura St., Ermita, Manila, the very locale of his novel. He welcomed the ASEAN delegates, myself included, with warmth and generosity, which, I would learn years later, was his typical reception for young writers and artists when they paid him a visit.

During that courtesy call, Manong Frankie gave away several copies of *Solidarity*, the literary journal that first paid attention to Southeast Asian writers and writing, to each of us. There were also free food and drinks for all, which I would also learn, another five years later, was typical, when I began attending the meetings and gatherings of the Philippine Center of International PEN, held at the end of each month in Solidaridad. I remember buying a copy of his novel *Viajero*, which he signed and simply inscribed, "Maraming Salamat!" I would receive more personal dedications and longer notes from him in the years to come.

In 1999, when I was named by Ophelia A. Dimalanta one of the junior fellows of the newly established UST Center for Creative Writing and Studies, I was able to interact with Manong Frankie more frequently. Back then, he would grace the Center with his presence twice or thrice a month as a senior fellow. He was always affable to me, though in a gruff grandfatherly kind of way, admonishing me at times for not paying more attention to my writing, since I was preoccupied back then with teaching as many as six undergraduate classes (with at least forty students in each class!) aside from helping organize the events of the Center.

I remember accompanying Ma'am Ophie, during that time, to an important dinner reception held in Manong Frankie's house in Quezon City—the guests included Bro. Andrew Gonzalez, the Secretary of the Department of Education, Culture and Sports back then, and the Director of the Toyota Foundation—where Manang Tessie, served us delicious dishes and desserts. I was able to have a brief *tête-à-tête* with her during that party, and learned how dedicated she was to Manong Frankie and his causes.

Years later, Manang Tessie would reveal in another *tête-à-tête*, a longer one this time, in Solidaridad Bookshop, that her grandfather, a medical doctor, was a classmate of Rizal in UST, and that, being a nurse herself, she was instrumental in making sure that Manong Frankie's medicines would not contraindicate one another by adjusting their dosage. She was partly (if not mostly) responsible, thus, for the long and productive life of the 2001 National Artist for Literature.

Through the years, Manong Frankie and Manang Tessie would continue to shower me with kindness and generosity. I would receive, from time to time, a signed copy of his latest book, with a separate note asking me if I had already finished my Ph.D., what had I been writing lately, as well as pieces of advice when I visited them in Solidaridad. Sometimes, a warm hug or a pat on the back from one of them was the only token I would bring home with me, but which I would realize later on was what I needed the most at that time, to continue in the solitary pursuit of "my craft or sullen art."

So even if I, too, had my awkward and embarrassing moments with Manong Frankie—what comes to mind is the CETA-CDE National Conference incident, where he abruptly stopped me, as I was introducing him as the keynote speaker, in front of hundreds of participants, saying in a loud voice: "*Tama na iyan, Ralph, gusto ko nang magsalita!*"—I can only remember him with fondness and gratitude, never with resentment or derision, like the grandfatherly writer figure I consider him to be.