

Frankie and Tessie: Reflections on the Passing of F. Sionil Jose (1924-2022)

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After several years of not seeing Frankie Jose, I met him again in Cebu in 2013 at the musical adaptation of his short story, “Progress.” Hendri Go was the man behind the production about an unappreciated government clerk. Hendri had invited me to the show.

The program went well, and afterwards, I went up to greet Frankie. I was feeling a bit guilty because I had not seen him nor his wife Tessie for over a decade, and indeed the first thing he said was something like, “Where have you been?”

I had launched my first two books at Solidaridad, the iconic bookshop owned by Frankie and Tessie. The first launch in 1988 (for *Woman with Horns and Other Stories*) had been arranged by Cebuana writer Lina Espina Moore, who had taken me under her wing. In 1991, I also launched the Philippine edition of my first novel, *Song of Yvonne* (aka *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*) at Solidaridad; I recall that was the day Mt. Pinatubo had exploded, so the evening had a strange and memorable quality with fine dust falling outdoors and blanketing streets and cars. Despite the volcanic eruption, the top floor of Solidaridad where the launch was held was packed; events at Solidaridad were always somewhat bohemian, cultured, and exhilarating.

Now in Cebu, I explained to Frankie that whenever I would visit the Philippines from California, I would just have a few days in Manila, and Manila’s traffic had become impossible. Grumpily, he muttered that I

should launch my books at Solidaridad, referring to launches of my other books elsewhere—apparently he had noticed. Frankie also made it clear that I should visit them at Solidaridad, and asserted we would launch my books there. His wife Tessie who was beside him, echoed his sentiments.

I was surprised that he and Tessie cared whether I visited them or not, given how busy they were. The two of them were like royalty amongst Manila's literati and intelligentsia; and they had numerous events and people to see. Aside from that, they had Solidaridad to run; they published books; Frankie headed PEN Manila. By this time, Frankie had authored some thirty books, with his five-book *Rosales Saga* novels published and translated by big international publishers. He had a string of awards including the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, the Cultural Center of the Philippine Centennial Award, the *Chevalier dans L'Ordre des Arts et Lettres*, the Pablo Neruda Centennial Award, and the National Artist Award for Literature.

And there the two of them were, looking hurt because I had not been visiting them.

I would learn that Frankie and Tessie had ties with Cebu and had affection for the place and its people. Tessie José's father, Dr. Antonio Jovellanos, had been the chief physician at Cebu's Eversley Childs Sanitarium; he had been an expert on leprosy. Tessie had an aunt, Sister Bernarda Jovellanos, who was a Benedictine nun in Cebu. Tessie's sister, Tusing Jovellanos Perez, lived in Cebu. Frankie described with warmth Cebu in the late 1940s, how he had visited it for the first time on board a C-47 twin-engine transport plane with bucket seats. He affectionately described Cebu as "a big town with very little traffic and a business district confined along a main street onwards to Fuente Osmeña, and ending at the Capitol. There were the Old Santo Niño shrine, the public market and the port area redolent with the smell of copra and horse dung."

Frankie and Tessie were fond of Cebuano writers. Aside from Lina Espina Moore, Frankie mentioned Estrella Alfon, Resil Mojares, Monsignor Rudy Villanueva, Erma Cuizon, Simeon Dumdum, among others. In the eyes of Frankie and Tessie, I was part of this tribe.

I made it a point to see them whenever I was in Manila.

By 2014, Manila had changed and had become denser, more chaotic, with high rises popping up everywhere, even in the Ermita area of Solidaridad. Still, whenever I entered the shop, I felt as if I'd come home. In

fact, the place evoked pleasant memories of my college years when my friends and I used to hang around the bookshop. There I felt safe and secure, and the books and people felt familiar; and seeing the Joses was like a joyful reunion with a beloved aunt and uncle.

I would climb up two flights of narrow stairs to find Tessie waiting, and she and I would spend time chatting in Cebuano about Cebu and literary tidbits.

After a while, Cesar (their assistant) would announce that “Sir” was ready to see me, and Tessie and I would climb the third flight of stairs (narrower still than the first two flights) to get to the top floor of Solidaridad where literary events were held, and where Frankie held court.

Because Frankie often had meetings with guests or students, I expected my visits to be brief, but those visits would last for hours. Aside from *merienda* around the round table, sometimes we had lunches outside—the Indian restaurant next to Solidaridad was a popular destination. When the new Casino Soler, opened, Frankie declared we would go there. He proudly showed me around the huge flashy Casino. There were other outings: once he brought me along to the book launch of a journalist in Forbes Park; he also invited me and Hendri Go to go with them to Quezon City to the Mall where he and Tessie took their evening walks. Afterwards, we had dinner at a Chinese restaurant there. What fun that was to travel with them in their SUV, fighting Manila’s traffic all the way to Quezon City, then to walk with the pair alongside Mall shops. It felt like being with family.

While Frankie could come across as intimidating, it was surprisingly easy to chat to him. He loved talking to people. Ask them questions so they can talk about themselves, he once advised me. Frankie himself loved to talk. He enjoyed looking back at his past: that he had been born in Rosales, Pangasinan, of humble background, and his family had lost their land to wealthy landlords. Then he would lapse into Jose Rizal and how Rizal wrote about injustices, the same sort that his family had suffered. Then he would ask me if I knew a particular Spanish-Filipino family, and what did I think of them? After I gave my opinion, he would name various members of that family, pointing out who was “good,” and who was not.

Needless to say, Frankie had strong opinions. Sometimes he had strong words about people who had crossed him. But he basically had a soft

heart, a real goodness towards people. I saw that tenderness in the way he treated his wife and his staff at Solidaridad. On one visit, I accidentally learned that some staff members were students whom he allowed to sleep at the bookshop to help them.

For an important man, Frankie could be self-effacing and he could laugh at himself. Once we were talking about how poor book sales could cause the remaindering (discontinuing) of books. He recounted meeting his American publisher who asked how many copies of his new book they should print—500,000? He and I laughed because that is a huge number for a literary title; we both knew that Filipino books really didn't sell at that level. "What did you tell him?" I asked. Frankie smiled and indicated he gave a smaller figure, 5,000, if I recall right. He continued that the title was eventually remaindered anyway.

He also talked about the fire in their bookshop, how they dragged all the books, damaged and undamaged, outside. Then chuckling, he added that no one bothered to steal the books.

He was idealistic and would lecture about injustice and poverty in the Philippines, and Jose Rizal, and Marcos whom he opposed, and foreigners exploiting the Philippines, and so on. But sometimes, he would get into territory that I felt was not politically correct, especially in his last years. But these statements, even if wonky, could be discussed without damaging your relationship. He was always open to any debate. And I suspect, Frankie had "favorites" and his favorite people might have differing opinions from him, but he still liked them.

Once, a group of writers were gathered around the table at Solidaridad and Frankie went after a writer. Eyes half-closed, voice a bit gruff, Frankie asked him why it was taking him so long to finish his novel. It's been years, Frankie said. It shouldn't take that long. Flustered the writer became defensive and stammered his explanations. I felt a bit sorry for the writer who appeared embarrassed, and when the writer quieted down, I said in a light voice, "Frankie, what we all need is a wife like Tessie so we can just write." He paused, then said something like, "You are correct." And I think he even laughed with the rest of us.

What I said was true of course: Every writer or artist needs a wife like Tessie. She reminds me of the wives of the Russian novelists, like Tolstoy

and Dostoevsky, women who served as the writers' companions, advisers, and ardent collaborators.

In 1949 Maria Teresita Jovellanos eloped with a young journalist who could barely make ends meet. In fact, Frankie said they had to elope because he didn't have the money to pay for a proper wedding. That marriage was made in heaven. Tessie's financial stability, intelligence, love, and devotion for Frankie allowed him to become the man he was. Tessie enabled Frankie so he could be F. Sionil Jose and spend day after day writing or dealing with literary matters. I doubt Frankie had to deal with mundane matters like a leaky faucet. Frankie knew this; the love these two had for each other was palpable. "Honey," they called each other, as they walked with linked arms, deep in their 90s.

This tribute to National Artist F. Sionil Jose therefore includes a respectful nod to his wife Maria Teresita Jovellanos Jose, who took the reins of being a publisher, bookseller, editor, public relations officer, accountant-bookkeeper, mother (to 7), grandmother (to 11), great-grandmother (to 7)—everything needed to allow her husband to accomplish his dreams and destiny.

Frankie, rest in peace.