

F. Sionil Jose: “Our most important asset is memory.”

Alma Cruz Miclat

Tributes from all over the world are pouring in for our National Artist and Ramon Magsaysay awardee for Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts, F. Sionil Jose, since he passed away on January 6 at age 97. Grieving, I looked for his recent personal note to me:

“My dear Alma, your loss is also mine and ours. You may want to keep this original draft of my tribute to Mario. I am now immobilized, on a wheelchair. –Affectionately, *Manong Frankie*.”

The tribute, titled *Mario Miclat: The Light that Dimmed*, handwritten on yellow lined paper on April 7, 2021, was serendipitously sent to me by FSJ on April 15, which was my late daughter Maningning’s birthday. It was published in his *Philippine Star* column, *Hindsight*, on April 12, nine days after my husband Mario, University of the Philippines professor and dean, poet, writer and translator, passed away.

FSJ was generous in saying that: “Mario’s passing is a major loss to Philippine academe, and to the country as a whole, for Mario was also a public intellectual of sterling character. Mario has written several books, fiction and nonfiction, which won him national awards.”

He further wrote: “Of their stay in China, Mario wrote two books, a fictionalized narrative of their life, *Secrets of the Eighteen Mansions* (Anvil Publishing, 2010), and a semi-travel book with perceptive observations of life and places in China... As a novel, *Secrets of the Eighteen Mansions* adroitly weaves Chinese history and events into the plot of the novel, giving it

historical context and contemporaneity—a master stroke worthy of a great writer.”

That tribute by “Manong” Frankie to Mario was not the first. In 2014, he penned the introduction to a festschrift in honor of the latter on his 65th birthday, a book titled *Fairground: A Literary Feast* (MMAFI & Erehwon, 2014). He wrote: “I asked Alma, Mario Miclat’s adoring wife, if I could see him soonest and so one afternoon the other week, the couple dropped by the shop and I got a much-needed lecture on China, the power structure and the decision-making process in that powerful country which, of late, had given us cause for worry and apprehension.”

I remember distinctly that day at Solidaridad, a quaint and much-loved bookshop in Padre Faura, Ermita which is as much an FSJ legacy as the Philippine Center of PEN International, which he founded in 1957. International PEN, acronym for “Poets, Playwrights, Essayists, and Novelists,” can be found in over 100 countries. It elected FSJ vice president during its 85th International Congress in 2019 in the Philippines, the first time it was held in Southeast Asia.

Mario’s and my meeting with Manong Frankie and his adorable wife, Manang Tessie, ended in a Japanese restaurant near the bookshop, with Manong having his favorite ramen, and picking up the bill. It was an enchanted evening of food, words, camaraderie, friendship, and kindness from the beloved couple of the literary world.

At the end of the book’s intro, he wrote: “This collection of poems, essays, plays and short stories is a tribute from like-minded friends and acquaintances—an imprimatur not so much for what Mario has already written, but as yet another welcome reminder that he should persevere and with our hopes, also prevail.”

Manong Frankie’s generosity knows no bounds. He also contributed to the book, with 39 other distinguished poets and writers—a veritable who’s who in Philippine literature—his short story, “Gangrene.” The heartbreaking story is about a colonel who visits his dying son, an activist tortured by his own men.

FSJ also wrote in the book’s introduction words that were for me, nostalgic and bittersweet: “I should mention here that I knew Maningning, Mario’s precious poet-daughter, before I met him and his wife, Alma. She used to visit, and show her poems to me. They were lyrical and deeply moving.

Since she grew up in China, she also wrote poetry in Chinese. We talked about Filipino culture and literature most of the time. It was with a sense of horrible loss that I received the news of her suicide. How I wished I had given her more of my time to convince her life is worth all the suffering for as long as the artist is passionately searching for the beautiful and the true.”

Manong Frankie’s concern and love for Maningning did not stop when she left our world for the Great Beyond. He continued his support—almost like a benediction—by attending religiously the Maningning Miclat Art Foundation activities—poetry awards, art awards, book launches, benefit concerts. We’ve been blessed by his presence, like that of the other National Artists Virgilio Almario, Bien Lumbera, and Ben Cabrera/Bencab. It was a big boost to the morale and spirit of young writers, poets, and artists whom he encouraged to be creative all his life.

Manong Frankie can also be very charming with his spur-of-the-moment invitations, like when he invited poet Ruth Elynia Mabanglo, historian Fe Mangahas, Mario, and me for lunch in his homey abode in QC. The food prepared by Manang Tessie and daughter Jette (who sadly passed away in the US weeks before FSJ) was simply delectable, especially *Manang’s* curry, which she mastered from their years of stay in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The animated conversation which stretched into late afternoon was even more delightful.

At the 54th anniversary of PEN Philippine Center, FSJ invited Mario to read a paper in the 150th Rizal Anniversary Conference on Nation and Culture at the Cultural Center of the Philippines on Dec. 3, 2011. Mario’s well-researched paper on Rizal, *Quo Vadis, Filipinas, 150 Years After Rizal’s Birth*, is included in his book of essays, *Hundred Flowers, Hundred Philosophies*, posthumously launched with his book of poetry, *Kailan Diwata at 70+ na Tula*, and novel, *21 West 4th Street*.

On Mario’s 70th birthday in September 2019, Manong Frankie and Manang Tessie joined other writer friends like Gilda Cordero Fernando, Rio Alma, Gémino H. Abad, Marj Evasco, Dinah Roma, Krip Yuson, Melba Maggay, Vim Nadera, Mike Coroza, among others, our bible study group called Church Café, our old NPA friends from Central Luzon, and the Miclat relatives. The venue, our favorite Trellis Restaurant in QC owned by our friend Dan Tayag, was also where we celebrated Mario’s 60th birthday. It would be his last birthday celebration with friends and family.

Our last meeting with FSJ was at the 85th PEN International Congress, hosted by the Philippine Center for the first time in the Philippines and in Southeast Asia on Sept. 30-Oct. 4, 2019. Mario and I would fly to Davao on the last day of the conference for the first ever Mindanao Art Fair and Conference. Our busy schedule would take its toll on Mario, who would be hospitalized on the last week of December.

We spent Christmas of that year at the Philippine Heart Center, where, after an angiogram, his surgeon declared he could not have an angioplasty procedure anymore as the affected arteries had already atrophied. We were allowed to go home on New Year's Day of 2020. Three months after, nationwide pandemic lockdown would be enforced. It pained me to know that Manong Frankie died in his sleep on the day he was supposed to have an angioplasty procedure. But it could have been a blessing, too, to spare him the excruciating pain and possible complications arising from his advanced age.

In his "Hindsight" column titled "Writers Under Martial Law" on the 50th anniversary of Philippine Center of PEN in December 2007, Manong Frankie wrote: "Those of us who have reached this rickety age—who have written this long—we all know that our most important asset is memory, the capacity to remember, to know history, our past, and to retrieve from this treasure trove those artifices which we then shape so carefully, so lovingly. Then we hope our puny creation is literature."

F. Sionil Jose, "the grand old man of Philippine letters" and "the conscience of the nation," had a prolific writing career spanning seven decades. He penned more than a dozen socially engaged novels translated into 28 languages. several short story collections, essays, and a regular newspaper column.

For all the accolades heaped upon him now by a grateful nation, our family will most remember and appreciate his being true to himself, his heartfelt kindness and love, and his being down-to-earth, as exemplified in his epitaph: "He wrote stories and he believed in them."