

The Quintessential F. Sionil Jose

Francisco S. Tatad

On January 6 this year, Francisco Sionil Jose, novelist, journalist, social and political critic, and Philippine national artist for literature, died at 97. His death has irreparably affected the nation's literary, social, cultural and political scene.

Critics have described Jose as the foremost Filipino novelist in English, the most prolific and celebrated of all his contemporaries. Before him had gone such notables as the talented 60-year-old poet and playwright Rolando Tinio in 1997; the 84-year-old master craftsman N.V.M. Gonzales in 1999; the legendary 87-year-old novelist, short story writer and essayist Nick Joaquin in 2004; the charismatic 87-year-old short story teller Alejandro Roces in 2011; the 96-year-old historical essayist Carmen Guerrero Nakpil in 2018; the 90-year-old short story writer and publicist Gilda Cordero Fernando in 2020; and the 93-year-old fictionist, master of prose and international editor's editor Juan T. Gatbonton in 2021.

Each of them stands high in the pantheon of Philippine letters, but none of them gained the acclaim that F. Sionil Jose did in his lifetime. His awards included the City of Manila Award for Literature in 1979; the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communication Arts in 1980; the Outstanding Fullbrighters Award for Literature in 1988; the Cultural Center of the Philippines' Award for Literature in 1989; the CCP Centennial Award for Literature in 1999; the National Artist award for Literature in 2001; the *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres* from France in 2000; the Order of Sacred Treasure (*Kun Santo Zuiho Sho*) from Japan in 2000; and the Pablo Neruda Centennial Award from Chile in 2004.

Jose’s five “Rosales novels,” which the Dutch editor Ian Buruma described in *The New York Review of Books* as an “allegory of the Filipino in search of an identity,” have been translated into 22 languages. No other Filipino author has been as widely translated. To James Fallows, the American writer who wrote in his *Atlantic Monthly* article that Filipinos had a “damaged culture,” “America has no counterpart to Jose—one who is simultaneously a prolific novelist, a social and political organizer, and a small scale entrepreneur.” Fallows is amazed that Jose could successfully run Solidaridad Publishing House and Bookshop as well as the Philippine Center for PEN (Poets, Playwrights, Essayists and Novelists) International, while producing a torrent of novels.

As a national artist, Jose’s output is perhaps matched only by the Hiligaynon poet and novelist, Ramon Muzones, who died in 1992, but was posthumously made National Artist for Literature in 2018, for having completed 61 novels in Hiligaynon. Frankie, as his friends called him, was such a prolific writer that people tried to get hold of his latest book even before they could finish digesting his previous one. On the day his heart broke while waiting for his scheduled angioplasty at Makati Medical Center, he was working on three books simultaneously at the printers—“Promdi, an Ilokano Autobiography,” “Writing the Nation,” a collection of essays, and a collection of short stories. All will now be published later.

I got drawn to Frankie’s work as a young student. As managing editor of *the Sunday Times Magazine*, he made it such a joy to read. From 1960 to 1965, he edited *Asia Magazine* in Hong Kong and came home to devote full time to writing short stories and novels, while running the Philippine Center for PEN International, and his bookshop. He was succeeded in Hong Kong by Johnny Gatbonton, who had edited the *Chronicle’s This Week Magazine* and whose short stories “Clay” and “A Record of my Passage” had won the Palanca awards. I had never met either, but both became my two literary idols.

On my second year in college, *Asia Magazine* published a short story I had written in class, for which they paid me US \$150. *The Varsity*, the UST student publication, used this as an excuse to make me its literary editor, without going through any qualifying exams. All this time I longed to, but never got to meet Frankie or Johnny Gat. I finally met them after I left college and became a full-fledged journalist. Solidaridad bookshop was on the same street as the Department of Foreign Affairs, which I covered for the

French News Agency and later the *Manila Daily Bulletin* before I joined the Marcos Cabinet. That's how I finally met the novelist.

My friendship with Frankie allowed him to see beyond his critical view of Marcos in judging my ten-year Cabinet service. In his Foreword to my 612-page autobiography, *All Is Grace*, (Solidaridad Publishing House, October 2021), Frankie says I was extremely helpful in restoring his right to travel after four years of being banned by Martial Law, and in facilitating meetings between PEN writers, foreign journalists and cultural leaders, and Marcos. The first of these meetings involved a high-powered PEN delegation from Britain made up of David Carver, Kathleen Nott and Peter Elstob, and any number of foreign journalists.

Frankie made me an active member of PEN, Philippine Chapter, and invited me to the PEN Congress in Seoul and Hamburg, together with the late Alejandro Roces, who also became a National Artist for Literature, where we met with prominent world celebrities like the Japanese Nobel Prize winner Yasunari Kawabata, the German Nobel Prize winners Heinrich Boll and Günter Grass, and American writers John Updike and John Cheever.

In 1980, I resigned from the Cabinet six years before the EDSA revolt. Frankie congratulated me for it. Later he supported my senatorial bid and my return to journalism as a columnist after two consecutive terms. As early as 2012, Frankie began urging me to publish my first novel, *The Last Holocaust*, then in progress, and some other book. I needed to work on the novel a bit more, I said, so he agreed to publish my autobiography, *All Is Grace*, instead, which Europe Books in London had also agreed to publish.

This was in January 2021. Then on February 6, 2021, he wrote me a short note saying “I forgot to tell you that Solidaridad has no money to shoulder the printing cost.” I had to raise the money, and by October 2021, the 612-page hardbound *oeuvre* was out. I suggested a book launch, but Frankie thought the Covid-19 pandemic would work against it. The bookshop began to sell the book, and on November 22, 2021, after selling a few copies, Frankie wrote me a short note saying, “Maybe we can have a book launch. You have so many friends...” The bookshop was not big enough, so I said we had to find a bigger place, and I had to see if my family would allow me to host a book launch in the middle of the pandemic. In any case, I told Frankie on the phone, it would be quite an event if the launch were to be hosted by the “two Franciscos”—the first as author of the three books he was working on, and the second as author of *All Is Grace*.

He thanked me for suggesting it, but said he might no longer be around by his next birthday on December 3, 2021. "Heaven forbid, you have to live for another one hundred years!" I said. He laughed mildly before our conversation ended. His 97th birthday came and went, without any surprises. Then on January 6, 2022, at the Makati Med, he spoke to his heart. He described himself as an agnostic who sometimes "doubted the presence of an almighty and loving God." But for 97 years, he said, he had been served well by his strong and brave heart. He hoped that his scheduled angioplasty would be a success, but he never got to have it. He passed peacefully after thanking his "heart and the Lord for this precious gift."

Frankie did not quite make it to be a hundred, but I have no doubt that his work and all the good things he did for his country, his family and friends, and the poorest of his brethren will live as long as memory lives, and I hope and pray that God in his infinite wisdom and mercy will see that every little thing he ever did for love, he ultimately did for his unseen God.

Toward the end of his life, Jose stepped on a banana peel when he failed to join the choir celebrating Maria Ressa's sharing the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize with Russia's Dmitry Moratov, "for their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace." He was vehemently attacked, and it must have hurt. As a National Artist for Literature and an RM Awardee for Journalism at that, he was expected to welcome the award for a Filipino journalist, and it was "politically incorrect" for him to suggest something was wrong with it. He could simply have said nothing, but the matter was far too grave and he was far too honest a writer and an artist to keep quiet. So he spoke.

Ressa is a fairly credentialed journalist, and if the Nobel Prize had given her an award for journalism, as distinguished from literature, nobody would have made any fuss. But as chief executive of the online news platform *Rappler*, the problem President Rodrigo Duterte raised against her had to do with the constitutional provision that all media organizations should be 100-percent Filipino-owned. She needed to show that the foreign investments received by *Rappler* did not violate the Constitution. This was the long and short of it.

Ressa has fought hard for herself, but it is another thing to fight for press freedom as such. As a life-long journalist, following ten years in the Cabinet and fifteen years in the legislative service, I was conducting a reasonably well-read, thrice weekly front-page newspaper column when

Duterte came into office. He resented my prying into his unexplained official disappearances and his uncertified state of health, and he threatened repeatedly, in public speeches, to bodily slap me if ever we met and to violate the honor of my wife. In the end, the chairman emeritus of my paper, whom Duterte had named to a sinecure, decided to completely cut me off. I became a proscribed columnist. Did *Rappler* ever speak against it?

I do not blame Ressa for accepting the award. She is no Le Duc Tho who rejected the Peace Prize in 1973 or Jean Paul Sartre who rejected the Prize for Literature in 1964 for the most valid reasons. But something has happened to the Nobel Peace Prize ever since the Peace Committee awarded it to Barack Obama in 2009 “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples.” Frankie was right to speak out; a major repair job in Oslo is needed.