

Remembering Manong Frankie

Christine F. Godinez Ortega

“**T**o know the truth of the human heart for the sake of all humankind” is one advice I remember best from my many encounters with National Artist for Literature and Ramon Magsaysay Awardee, F. Sionil Jose. At the same time, I learned more about a writer’s responsibility to himself, to his people, and to the rest of humanity.

Through the years, I came to associate more key terms with him, such as “cultural identity,” “Filipinoness,” and the writer’s “boundless imagination.” He was a much-awarded, wiser writer, whose publications include numerous short stories, essays, a children’s story, and novels translated into many languages. And we begin to understand the years a writer spends in reading, writing, and interacting with people and, above all, perseverance over one’s craft that keeps the writer faithful to his art in the pursuit of perfecting it.

The man’s faith in humanity was always present even when he joked about current events or when he engaged in personal banter with young writers. He and his gracious wife, whom we took to calling Manang Tess, had always been hospitable to many writers, hosting *meriendas*, lunches and dinners often to writers in his home or at the Solidaridad Bookshop.

I also knew that he understood the true meaning of mortality. He knew his life was coming to an end—a realization that made his wise words heartfelt, resonating with many young people when he lectured about literature and creative writing in different schools, colleges, or universities, or enjoyed their company during conferences traveling around the country, despite his age and his limited mobility.

I met Manong Frankie for the first time as an undergraduate at Silliman University where I was a college sophomore in the English and American Literature program.

That day the weather had cooled. It was early evening when I prepared to wind down at the Periodicals Section at the Silliman Main Library. I just finished reading a paper about the sexual metaphor of Cinderella's shoes in, I think, the *Chicago Review* when I remembered that there was a prior announcement in class that a certain editor and publisher of the magazine *Solidarity* would be speaking at the Silliman Hall—a well-known landmark from Dumaguete's Rizal boulevard that today houses the Anthropological Museum.

Onstage was a man, his face intense, who stood straight behind a microphone, gesturing, and conversing passionately with my mentors, Edilberto and Edith Tiempo over what I—barely 18 years old—couldn't figure out at the time. The public address system was bad enough, and my mother's face kept popping up in my mind because it was too late an hour for me to return home.

The Silliman Hall was half full, poorly lighted, and I wondered where my other classmates could be. There were more faculty members than students that night in which this man, who turned out to be Francisco Sionil Jose, spoke. Martial Law was yet to be declared in the country.

After the open forum ended, I went up to Sionil Jose to shake his hand—a habit my classmates and I had when there were writers visiting the campus. My mentors promptly introduced me to him. But I had no questions to ask, and I merely smiled. Yet I knew instinctively that I would meet him again, somehow.

Years later, I did meet F. Sionil Jose again in Cebu during a PEN conference where I presented a paper, and in Manila, at his office in Solidaridad Bookshop, and in several more places across the country: Cagayan de Oro, Iligan, Zamboanga, Davao.

One of these memorable meetings was by a gate in Malacañang Palace. By then, he was National Artist for Literature. He introduced me to "Mahal," his wife, Manang Tess, while Sionil Jose insisted I call him "Manong Frankie."

It was the beginning of a warm friendship. The couple would host me and my friends whenever we dropped by the Solidaridad Bookshop.

Well into the 1980s and 1990s Manong Frankie had put on weight, moving slower than when I first met him in Silliman, but he was as gregarious as ever.

Manong Frankie once said to me (and I guess to many other writers), “You drop by whenever you’re in Manila and don’t knock at my [office] door. Just come in,” he said, sitting before his enormous electric typewriter. And I thought, so this is where he writes his short stories, novels, numerous essays, and a children’s story.

During the 27th Iligan National Writers Workshop where, as director, I had invited him to deliver the keynote address, he also mentioned that he had three notebooks for his notes: one in his office, one in his house, and another when he was traveling.

Other invitations to visit his home with my writer friends, most of them from the University of Santo Tomas (UST), came my way. Amid the conversation, food and drinks flowed. Once, Korean food was served, and we had fun broiling meats in his yard. Carried away by our conversation and laughter, we just forgot what time it was. When he and Manang Tess were ready for bed, Manong Frankie, in his by now familiar voice, would tell us that it was time for us to go. And having enjoyed the couple’s hospitality, we took our leave gratefully.

On the second floor of the Solidaridad Bookshop, there were books all over the place. And the next time I visited him with my fellow writer Jaime An Lim, he invited us to choose any one book from the shelves. My acquisitiveness for books made me take two instead of one, insisting on keeping both—one on Borges and the other on Latin American poetry. As soon as he realized I wanted the two books, he tilted his head to one side, his mouth opened, and his eyes widened. Then he chuckled his consent.

At another time, Manong Frankie introduced me to American black poets through an anthology declaring that Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks were “good poets, good reads.”

Each visit was a unique venture, if you can call it that.

Manong Frankie had many things to tell me and my friends, and he began this more than once with, “*Magyayabang ako.*” He would then proceed to show us his translated novels. We’d grab one and flick open the pages we couldn’t read, and marvel at the achievement of this Filipino writer that many students did not know much about.

Fast forward in the future at the advent of the digital revolution and the election of a popular President from Mindanao, he too shared his thoughts in Facebook from his column for the daily *Philippine Star*. He gave his straightforward, frank assessment of the present, and many young, opinionated writers, who had yet to prove themselves within the sphere of what we call Philippine literature, reacted angrily, and chastised him. I felt aghast over these developments, for here's a writer at the twilight of his years who need not be mocked for his political opinions, which to me, in a democratic set up, were honest but not contemptuous of those who disagreed with him.

Most Filipinos take things personally and *pakikisama* matters. I hope these writers when they get to be Manong Frankie's ripe age won't experience what he had gone through. Karma (*gaba* to me, a Visayan) does work in our lives. But Manong Frankie was a journalist and therefore, in my view, tougher than most, not easily disturbed by negative comments.

As a journalist and writer, Manong Frankie had always maintained that politics is part of life, and infectious where its sordidness manifest themselves one way or the other.

He was also quite free in giving advice; no matter how basic, he gave advice to writers about the writing craft. At times, he seemed to me bored in giving advice, but he still enumerated helpful tips to writers.

But what I remember more vividly were tidbits from him that made him human in my eyes: when he reminisced about his crush; when he, as editor of the *Sunday Times Magazine*, put Carmen Ortega on its cover; and when he was in Mindanao, going around Lake Lanao and other provinces in South Cotabato, citing his concerns about further development for the island, as it is culturally rich and as diverse compared to other regions of the country.

Now, the juicy part: his crush was from my hometown Dumaguete. When he was on a boat bound for Manila, it made a stopover in Dumaguete. He got off and went to his crush's house and found her "sweeping the yard." He described the woman and the house, and it amused me when I realized it was a house located three houses away from across our own. The story stopped there, and much as I wanted to probe deeper, I held back. It was water under the bridge.

I was half-laughing when he told me that story, for I wanted to know if he had missed his boat back to Manila and if they shared a cup of coffee. He told me the implication when a Japanese would invite a girl to have coffee with him in the morning.

The next time I visited Manong Frankie, he became aware that I had just changed my last name. He then asked if I knew a “Carmen Ortega.” He said that as editor of *Sunday Times Magazine* he put her on the cover. Well, I thought she must have been a beauty to be on a magazine cover. Still curious, I asked, who is Carmen Ortega?

Manong Frankie told me she was the first wife of then President Ferdinand Marcos. Ah yes, I said I had some vague recollection of the name. I was a high schooler when I first heard of the name from friends of friends enrolled in Silliman’s College of Law. The law students talked, no debated, over the issue of whether a candidate is qualified to run for the highest office in the land since he was married before, yet he had another wife. The law students were referring to the candidate, Ferdinand Marcos, who was married by then to Imelda Romualdez from Olot, Leyte. Unfortunately, I learned more about Imelda than about Carmen Ortega.

But what I knew about Imelda from my late Dad, who excitedly talked about Imelda’s boyfriend, a medical doctor from Tanjay, Negros Oriental, about 45 minutes north of Dumaguete. In fact, I read in one of her first interviews as the country’s newest First Lady that she dreamed of marrying a medical doctor instead of a politician.

That was when I began to hear more about Imelda. Years later, I told Manong Frankie when at 15-years-old, my siblings and I had spent our vacation in Cotabato City with our aunts and cousins there. It was also an exciting time because Cotabato was abuzz with the presidential campaign, and with Ferdinand and Imelda coming there for the first time, I heard about a “Solid North,” an uncle kept on saying that, showing us a plastered Philippine map on the wall.

Because of the family’s Waray connection I went along, because I also wanted to see Imelda, whose beauty was legendary since she became a candidate in the Miss Manila beauty pageant. Above all, she was a playmate of my aunt’s husband, and a neighbor in Dumaguete was from Olot, Leyte who knew her.

On the day of the rally, one of my uncles, a supporter of Marcos, herded us kids into the vehicle and off we went to the Plaza.

True enough, I saw how tall and beautiful Imelda was with fair skin, high cheekbones, well-coiffed hair, and graceful demeanor seated beside her husband, Ferdinand in the plaza kiosk.

Later, our group followed the Marcoses to the Cathedral and each of us stood at the aisle to greet the man who wanted to shake our hands. When he came to me, Marcos said, "I saw you at the Plaza," and I smiled and bowed to him. That was how I will always remember the former President who had a photographic memory of people.

Somehow, I now believe what a small world we live in, and we meet people who were mentioned to us, or whom we would meet sooner or later in our personal or professional lives.

As literature majors, often, we took for granted meeting writers, especially Filipino writers. We always thought these writers would always be around. My mentors, who were writers themselves, often regaled us with anecdotes about their own professors and the writers they met as students in the US, like the American poet Robert Frost.

Back in Silliman as a literature major, aside from Manong Frankie, I met several local and foreign writers most of them Americans, like the poet Kenneth Rexroth. Foreign diplomats often visited as well, and some brought with them their own country's writers. The Silliman writers workshop likewise had many renowned Filipino writers who came and went as panelists and whom we interacted with as well. Among the more visible Filipino writers who often visited Silliman was Kerima Polotan who shared her writing habits to us. But one other writer I corresponded with as editor of Silliman's literary journal *Sands and Coral* was Gregorio Brillantes, whose short stories I read in my classes but with whom I never met personally. I learned much when he typed out neatly the corrections to his contribution on why he wrote in English in *Sands and Coral*. I remember him saying, "put a comma here, a comma there, another comma over there." "Oh", he said, "I hope with all those commas, you aren't in a coma yet!"

My memories of writers have always been pleasant because most of them were kind and friendly. And for all the suggestion that the Tiempos of Silliman were CIA agents, we their students were made to read and discuss Filipino authors. The books came in boxes, and as literature majors we were

made to read books from a reading list that included Manuel Arguilla, Nick Joaquin, Kerima Polotan, NVM Gonzalez, Gregorio Brillantes, and Gilda Cordero Fernando. And of course, there was F. Sionil Jose.

All wrote in English and naturally, those were the books we read, because Visayans that we were, we couldn't read Tagalog literature that well. We as students understood the motive of our mentors, which was to show that we belonged to an archipelagic, diverse, colorful, and exciting country, regardless.

In the 1970s, the political movement Feminism swept the country. And it was no brainer to be curious about how Sionil Jose, the writer, described his women characters in his 20 or so short stories and in his novels. Truth to tell, I read only two of his novels, some of his short stories and to be fair about it, I could not give a substantial assessment of how he characterized his women characters.

Later, it was my former undergraduate and post-graduate student, Dr. Loreta L. Fajardo, who discussed with me the women characters of Sionil Jose.

After doing her Graduate work at Xavier University, and meeting Sionil Jose in Cagayan de Oro and in Iligan for a conference I organized for PEN and for friends, Lito Zulueta and Shirley Lua, Loreta shared with me her thoughts about Sionil Jose's women characters. She said they "exuded sophistication, were seductive, sensual, tempting, provocative, and flirtatious." Loreta said Sionil Jose's descriptions were graphic and explicit that added "spice" that intrigued and fascinated her.

Meeting him in person and after being informed that Loreta had studied 20 of his short stories for her MA thesis, Manong Frankie asked what among his stories was her favorite, and she said it was "The God Stealer." Manong Frankie asked her next if she had read "Waywaya," and of course Loreta said she had. This to me explained why Manong Frankie traveled to many parts of the country despite his age and limited mobility. for a man in his nineties. He wanted feedback from his readers, and he knew what questions to ask them.

It has always been a learning experience to witness writers converse with his readers. Not many writers and readers have such privilege. Like many writers and perhaps, any human being, Manong Frankie wanted to learn if he was "getting through" direct from his readers, even at the height of

his body of works, his awards both in the country and abroad, and his other accomplishments.

Manong Frankie as a writer and a human person, taught me to have some measurement of a writer's impact on readers. As a writer there were always challenges to be met, as well as to gauge his significance as a keeper of memory, and to confirm or to ensure that he had spoken to and about his own people.

In the ultimate analysis, he finally must have realized that, and to quote him during his keynote address in the Iligan workshop, "life is bigger than himself [the writer]" and that eventually, "he is judged through his art," not his politics nor his personal life.