

“The Conscience of the Nation”: Remembering the Great Frankie Jose

James Fallows

I was heartbroken to see in the papers this weekend that F. Sionil Jose, a writer and civic leader known to millions as “Frankie,” had died at a hospital in Manila at age 97.

I say heartbroken rather than shocked, because through the decades in which I had known Frankie, starting in the 1980s when he was younger than I am now, he had frequently joked that his joyful indulgence in every temptation of life would soon do him in.

As I noted in short piece in 2009 about a visit to him in Manila:

“Every time I’ve met Jose over the last 20-plus years, he’s said, ‘Jim, I am getting so much fatter!’—with a big laugh, because he loves food (among other pleasures) so much. But Jose has a deadly-serious claim to being the conscience of his nation—at legal and physical risk during the Marcos years, and as a sobering voice in the years since then.

As I also noted at the time, the main reason I had been interested in the Nobel Prize announcements for Literature was to see whether the jurors would finally get around to recognizing F. Sionil Jose for his life’s work.

That can’t happen now—Nobel prizes go to the living—but all the rest of us can still notice the remarkable works of this man, and the power of the life he led.

The first of his books I read was *The Pretenders*, from his famed five-volume “Rosales Saga” novels. The book’s plot and tensions are specific to the

Philippines. But just as Faulkner was not writing only about Mississippi, nor Dickens only about England, Frankie Jose was not writing only about his home islands. His work is rich, broadly human, and beyond borders.