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Tondo By Two: Selected Short Stories

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TONDO BY TWO: SELECTED SHORT STORIES. By Pacifico N. Aprieto and Andres Cristobal Cruz, Manila: National Book Store, 1980. 87 pages. P14.50.

The second edition (1980) of *Tondo By Two*, published by National Book Store, offers the opportunity to review and re-evaluate this volume which first appeared in 1961. (Many of the stories had been written in the preceding decade.) The little collection of eight stories by Pacifico N. Aprieto and Andres Cristobal Cruz has aged remarkably well and the stories read perhaps better now than they did in 1961. The reason is social as well as literary. "Certain truths about life in the slums live in these stories," N.V.M. Gonzalez writes in his short Introduction to the 1961 edition (p. 2), and the two writers "combine here to urge us to find some sources of sustenance against the social imperfections that surround us. . . ." (p. 3)

Aprieto and Cruz both grew up in the Tondo which is the setting of most of the stories in this collection. They studied together at Rizal Elementary School near the Estero de la Reina and the railroad tracks across Tayuman, and at Torres High School, and went on to Liberal Arts at the University of the Philippines where they began to write seriously. The stories collected here appeared originally in *This Week*, *Sunday Times*, *Philippine Collegian* and the *Literary Apprentice*. Cruz's "The Quarrel" won First Prize in the Palanca Memorial Awards in 1953, and Aprieto's "Haircut" won third prize in the 1952 *Philippine Collegian* Literary Contest. Aprieto is now Director of the Philippine Government Textbook Project, and Cruz is a Director of the Ministry of Public Information.

The eight stories in this collection play variations on the theme of a changing Tondo, in which the Estero de la Reina is the dominant image. Cruz writes:

When I was a boy the estero's tide was cool and green. I learned to swim in the estero before I learned to swim in the beach of Bangkusay, or in the rivers of Balut island. After the war, the estero was never clean. It was dark and dirty with dead and dying things that floated or were dumped; rain and sun raised from it the dark odor of decay and silt, mud and dead grass, and bloated animals, and of rubbish and rotting lilies. (p. 61)

Aprieto writes in similar fashion in "Heir":

Once this rain would have swept over open stretches of cogon and talahib, rows of squat bamboos; would have washed away loose chunks of clay from dikes, would have muddled (sic) quadrangles of fishponds that his father used to tend (and own, he said) before the Americans came to the Islands. The wind, flowing (sic) sluggishly, its path broken by posts and wooden fences close to the mud under the houses of the neighbors, would have whistled and rolled freely and the odor that it would have

brought would have been that of rich green things, of the fresh fresh clean earth – not this, the reek of stale air, of dampness and dark, of old things and decay. Not this, the smell of not knowing sun, of not knowing space and heights. (pp. 23-24).

A handful of basic symbols are operative in the four stories of Cruz. The Estero de la Reina appears in all of them – sometimes as barrier, and sometimes as bridge, but always dirty and polluted, and an image of what Tondo, as well as the lives of its people, has become. Light and dark are also in all the stories – dark nights, especially, neon lights, a single incandescent bulb, stars and sunshine. To underline the light-dark imagery, a quote from Balagtas appears opposite the title page: “Sa isang madilim, gubat na mapanglaw.” Literature and music and flowers function as obvious contrasting images in several of the stories. Rain – usually a sad, dripping rain, not a cleansing rain – and the sea also echo throughout Cruz’ stories. It is interesting to note that there is a girl at the center of each of Cruz’ stories – Magdalena, Nina, Marie and the unnamed girl of “So.”

“White Wall” is the best of Cruz’ four stories in this collection. Magdalena is an effective focus for the author’s self reflection, as well as a mirror for Tondo. “The Quarrel” doesn’t quite seem to work, despite its Palanca Memorial Award in 1953. Perhaps it is too labored. “So” is too artistically self-conscious and “Reunion” is obviously adolescent. In all four stories, Cruz is a young writer trying (too?) hard, testing his skills and mastering his vision. It is Tondo that really carries the stories.

Although they share many qualities, and a surprising number of idiosyncracies, Aprieto is much more suggestive and “existential” than Cruz. If the Balagtas quote on the title page belongs to Cruz, the Hemingway quote clearly belongs to Aprieto:

“Good night,” the other said. Turning off the electric light, he continued the conversation with himself. It is the light of course but it is necessary that the place be clean and pleasant. What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada . . .

Aprieto is also much more concise than Cruz – his longest story is only eleven pages and the other three average only six pages each. He hints rather than elaborates. He is also more obviously derivative. There are echoes of Hemingway in “Night”, of Ring Lardner in “Haircut” and of Faulkner in “Heir.” “Heir” is the most ambitious of the stories as Aprieto intertwines the theme of generations with that of father-son transference (rivalry?) against the counterpoint of change and death. The anay-riddled statue of a boy reaching for the sun, and the rats in the decaying house are somewhat

obvious symbols that destroy the subtlety of Aprieto's theme. He handles his theme much more skillfully in "Flower Bed."

National Book Store deserves a word of commendation for reprinting the Cruz-Aprieto collection and making the stories once more available. The book is handsomely printed and bound, although better proofreading would have avoided the obvious errors that betray the proofreader's (editor's?) ignorance. Androcleus and the Lion (p. 83) and an obvious misprint on the back cover blurb stand out, but there are also glaring misprints and errors in idiom throughout (e.g., pp. 6, 7, 10, 11, 17, 18, 19, 23, 30, 57, 58, 59, 60, 62, 69, 70, 72, 73, 82, 87.) It is regrettable that Philippine writing is so often marred by poor editing and ignorant proofreading.

The cover blurb on this National Book Store edition comments on the authors twenty years after the stories first appeared:

their home in the suburbs may be worlds away from the once familiar esteros and alleys of their childhood haunts. Tondo, however, remains a presence made romantic, one suspects, by time and distance. *Tondo By Two* sums up that memory.

Perhaps time does inevitably romanticize, but it is a tragedy, I think that Tondo has become romantic and that these two authors no longer write of the real Tondo. It is saddest of all if these Tondo stories are only memories. Tondo in 1981 needs more than memories. It needs another generation of writers like Cruz and Aprieto.

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

SELECTIONS FROM CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN POETRY.
Selected and edited by Muhammad Haji Salleh. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1978. 118 pages.

The introduction will strike a familiar note to readers of Asian poetry:

When the first poets began to write there was an obvious restlessness in their poems, romantic perhaps in their manifestations yet solid and socially committed in their tone and purpose. The young poets were a new generation of Malays, leaders among their own people. From the time of these beginnings poetry has been social in its commitment.

And indeed as the Malaysian poet sings of life and celebrates the loves and hates that surround him, he molds into his lyricism an awareness of the abject state history has imposed on colonized countries like theirs – and ours. Latiff Mohidin, for example, writes poignantly of loss:

when your banks slide away
when your villages slide away