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## **The Case Against Marcelo Dungo, Watchman and Other Stories and Articles**

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I have deliberately saved for the last the insights with which the fictionist has starred her book from beginning to end, progressively, cumulatively — insights all of them organic, all of them earned: guideposts on the road to the realization of the race and the self by one's self.

*Francisco Arcellana*

THE CASE AGAINST MARCELO DUNGO, WATCHMAN AND OTHER STORIES AND ARTICLES. By Pacifico N. Aprieto. Manila: National Book Store, 1980. P11.50.

These are youthful stories. Aprieto is now a full time government administrator and no longer writes creatively. He is far, both in time and in place, from Tondo which is the setting of most of his early stories. The seven stories and two essays in the collection all date from the fifteen year period, 1950-1964, when Aprieto was a member of "a nebulous group of writers on the University of the Philippines campus." They have been collected here in this volume for the first time. The two journalistic essays ("What's In a Sneeze" and "The Dance: From Protozoa to Primates") are hardly worth reprinting, but the half dozen stories (there is one additional story in Tagalog) are an interesting chronicle of a young writer and of a period when Philippine writing in English was coming fully of age.

"On a Country Visit" is the kind of story that every young writer produces at some time in his early years. "I had wanted to write for a long time now, but I was conscious of a growing impotency, the low ebb of perceptiveness and profundity of the feeling and the mind. I had hoped . . . I would find and recapture that long lost urge to write, to word the feeling and mind with an uncompromising sincerity." (p. 63) The date of that story is 1950, the earliest in the collection the story has remained unpublished until now, and with reason. In it the author is too self consciously the artist, too much aware of himself and too engrossed with words for their own sake.

One Manila reviewer finds echoes of Hemingway in the title story, "The Case Against Marcelo Dungo, Watchman," and labels it "a failed attempt at stylistic innovation." Although it is the best known of Aprieto's stories, the apparently disconnected and impressionistic themes in the story have no focus, and Lope Toribio, the real center of the story, emerges as a blurred character. Aprieto handles his central characters much more skillfully in "The Man Who Hated Rats" and in "Old Man." The first of these two stories, however, is flawed by a labored symbolism that doesn't quite work. It betrays the young writer's lack of skill and experience in handling his theme. The second story is much more competently handled and Aprieto has integrated the symbol of the murdered dog much more successfully. The best of the

stories is "Underbrush" which narrates the encounter of a young stranger with the unnamed loneliness of an island in the southern Philippines. The loneliness is in the earth and in the jungle growth, in the ominous beat of the *kalintang* and in the young girl who delivers his meals on the porch and then flees. "It is indigenous to the wild. Inescapable. It stalks and consumes its prey." (p. 67)

In his stories, Aprieto is much obsessed with loneliness and change — Santiago Daguis in the old house in Tondo, "the last of its kind left standing in the congested neighborhood," the old woodcutter who sees his livelihood destroyed by age and the advent of kerosene stoves, the young writer seeking inspiration in memories that no longer exist, and, perhaps autobiographically, Pepeng's inability as an office worker in the Civil Service Commission to return to the tangled web of youthful relationships that had once shaped his life in a Tondo that no longer exists. It is Tondo, in its growing decadence and inevitable change for the worse, which is at the heart of these stories, as it is in Aprieto's other (and better) collection, *Tondo By Two*. The reviewer (and reader) of this collection of early stories cannot help but wonder what Aprieto's vision would be now if he were to write once again after twenty-five years.

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

THE MANILA HOTEL: THE HEART AND MEMORY OF A CITY. By Beth Day. Manila: National Media Production Center, 1980. 254 pages.

Perhaps it is inevitable that a book on the most venerable hotel in the country should contain the choicest vignettes about that country's high society. Hence *The Manila Hotel* is the heart and memory of that segment (a very thin one) of a city that is well-coiffed, expensively perfumed and gowned, and very well fed. Page after page speaks of sumptuous buffets and chefs with distinguished names (foreign), of elegant balls and American officials dancing the *rigodon de honor*, of Winter Gardens and Champagne Rooms and MacArthur Penthouses and the Filipino servants that tread obsequiously within.

The truth is, as Miss Day herself records, the Manila Hotel, from its inception, was not meant to be the heart of the city in which it was to stand. On the day of its official opening, set for American Independence Day, 1912, the *Manila Times* headlined on its front page:

"MANILA HOTEL — MONUMENT TO AMERICANISM"

As for the Filipino role, the American manager, Mr. Reynolds, is quoted as saying