

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## Choice Books of 1995

Danton R. Remoto

*Philippine Studies* vol. 44, no. 1 (1996): 144–149

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## Choice Books of 1995

Danton R. Remoto



The year just past produced a bumper crop of Philippine books. In spite of the 65 percent increase in the price of paper, the boom in local publishing still continued. As in other aspects of our cultural life, there is also a growing market abroad for Philippine books, as shown by orders from bookstores on the U.S. West Coast and in the Asia-Pacific region.

Fiction was particularly strong this year. *Penmanship & Other Stories* (Cacho Publishing House) is the fifth book of Jose Y. Dalisay Jr., whom critics have described as "one of the masters of Filipino short fiction in English." In this book we see a more relaxed Dalisay, as his prose caroms round locales here and abroad, in times present and past. The book is composed of seven short stories and one short novel, "Voyager," set in Spanish Philippines.

Dalisay wrote the story "We Global Men" while on a fellowship at Hawthornden Castle in Scotland. Here, the dreams of today's yuppie businessman on a business visit in Scotland collide with the reality that, ironically, comes from an old, hand-tinted photograph of three Filipino children in a shop called "The Orient, Etc." Dalisay shows us he can deftly navigate the waters of postcolonial fiction. The title story, "Penmanship," on the other hand, involves an old bachelor, who has a passion for fountain pens, and his new assistant in the office, a blind woman. As the day passes, the man slowly falls in love with her. But Dalisay skillfully reins in all emotions until the very end, when she asks him to write a letter for her former lover who had abandoned her. Amidst all that devastation, Dalisay writes: "The Parker Vacumatic glinted in the room light, poised to strike. It was ringed with bands of gold, and promised a wealth of words. The merest pressure on its nib could deepen an emotion."

National Book Award winner Tony Perez published not one, but two books of fiction this year. In February, he launched *Cubao Midnight Express: Mga Pusong Nadiskaril sa Mahabang Riles ng Pag-ibig* (Cacho Publishing House) at the National Bookstore Superstore branch in Cubao. And just as 1995 was winding up, Cacho also published his *Cubao-Kalaw Kalaw-Cubao: Mga Premyadong Akda*.

First published in *The Manila Times*, 14 and 21 January 1996.

Love and darkness intertwine in *Cubao Midnight Express*. The story "Pamamanhikan" inhabits the mind of a serial killer who murders the women he loves. It is a story made more chilling by the fact that all the violence is conveyed in the most delicate, most lyrical, prose. On the other hand, the persona in "Kaisplit" finds his best friend in his sex organ. In the tradition of Nikolai Gogol's story *The Nose*, Perez goes to town with this outrageous take on sexual politics from the Seventies to the Eighties.

The second book contains the novel *Bata, Sinaksak, Sinilid sa Baul* (co-winner of the grand prize for the novel, 1984 Palanca Literary Awards) and the one-act plays "Sacraments of the Dead" (first prize, 1981 Palanca Literary Awards) and "The Wayside Cafe" (third prize, 1984 Palanca Literary Awards).

In *Cubao-Kalaw Kalaw-Cubao*, Tony Perez continues his explorations of our inner landscapes. An almost hallucinatory quality informs this novel. Dreams slide into nightmares, the terrible crime and the lives of those whose brother/father/foster father were involved in that crime intermingle, "tulad ng semilya sa tubig."

In one page, Capampangan, Filipino and English are spoken like a babel of tongues. But unlike an Old Testament god of anger and revenge, this novel is an expansive one, full of generosity and grace. And unlike the character Cezar, who is a blind archangel of the alleys, Perez sees with clarity: his novel blazes beautifully in the darkness. With this fifth book in the Cubao series, he is raising a body of work without equal in contemporary Philippine fiction.

Lazaro Francisco, the master of the Filipino novel, won the Republic Cultural Heritage Award in 1970. His famous works include *Maganda Pa Ang Daigdig* and *Ama*. Like these other novels, *Sugat ng Alaala* (Ateneo de Manila University Press) weds exquisite craft with social commitment.

In the words of fictionist Rogelio Sikat: "Hindi lamang ito matimyas na nobela ng pag-ibig, kasaysayan din ito ng nakaraang digmaan. Kung romantiko ang mga nagdaang kabanata, realistiko ang mahabang bahagi tungkol sa giyera. Ipinakita rito ni Francisco ang buo niyang kakayahan sa pagsulat. Mapait na sugat din kay Francisco ang digmaan: parehong napatay sa Bataan ang kapatid niyang bunso at panganay na anak, gaya ng nakasaad sa pag-aalay ng nobela."

*Transient* is young writer C. J. Maraan's first book. Published by De La Salle University Press, this collection of stories comes with an introduction from the late Bienvenido N. Santos. The young women in these stories are sharp, ironic, and sad. They see the world with the gift—and the curse—of sensitivity. As Mr. Santos writes in his perceptive introduction: "I have always assumed that Connie's stories of exile were written from personal experience, that her character, Lisa Bernal, as well as Addie could not have been purely a figment of her imagination: they are drawn with such deep

compassion and almost hypersensitivity." Ms. Maraan is a young writer who has the ability to write a novel for the Nineties.

It was a rather lean year for poetry. Because of high costs, Anvil Publishing could not come up with individual poetry books for its Contemporary Philippine Poetry series. As a cost-cutting measure, it planned to publish three or four poets in one anthology, that is, until the fire that broke out in its warehouse last December burned up all its stock. Books worth P45 million simply went up in smoke. In a letter to all its writers, Anvil said it will honor its commitment to these poets, perhaps even publish individual poetry books for them. But first, the insurance has to be collected, and the fast-selling cookbooks and children's books reprinted.

Last year, Anvil only managed to publish *A Passionate Patience: Ten Filipino Poets on the Writing of their Poems*, edited by Ricardo M. de Ungria. Himself a poet, de Ungria has published five books, the latest of which, *Nudes* (Anvil) won a National Book Award in 1994.

At first blush, this anthology may seem like an exercise in self-indulgence, with poets citing a litany of other poets who had influenced them. Thankfully it is not; what it is is a helpful guide into what goes on in the creative process, that moment when poets try to catch words on the wing and pin them down on paper. This collection includes some of the leading lights in Philippine poetry: Gémino H. Abad, Carlos A. Angeles, Cirilo F. Bautista, Ricaredo D. Demetillo, Ophelia A. Dimalanta, Marjorie M. Evasco, Alejandrino G. Hufana, Edith L. Tiempo, the late Trinidad Tarrosa Subido, and Alfred A. Yuson.

"This book," de Ungria says, is "about what went on in the writing of a poem—what problems arose, what resources were tapped, and what solutions were arrived at. . . . [It] underscores the importance of revision in writing, which in itself is an art whose temptations the young writer would not find difficult to resist because of its stringent and exacting demands, but which must be eventually yielded to because it is good to do so, because it is where the art of good writing lies, and because it is productive of excellence—which is what art as craft is all about."

Finally, Ramon C. Sunico has published his long-awaited collection of poems, *Bruise: A 2-Tongue Job* (Indio Ink). This is composed of poems from his first book, *The Secret of Graphite: Poems in 2 Tongues* (1989), which Sunico himself designed, printed, and bound while working at Maroverlag in Germany on a publishing grant from the Carl Duisberg Gesellschaft. He also added new poems for this second collection.

The author also did the handsome design for *Bruise*. Between the white covers of this elegant book are some of the finest lyrics I have read. Sunico is our supreme stylist, with language—or languages, since he writes in both English and Filipino—at his command. He wrote a camouflaged prayer for Ambeth Ocampo after the latter joined the Benedictine Order and became

Dom Ignacio Maria. Called "The Garden of Earthly Delights," this could very well describe the pleasure to be had in reading Sunico's book of poems. This poem won the second prize in the *Philippines Free Press* literary awards.

The poem goes: "Sumptuous reading rooms:/ Dimpled armchairs of cordovan and oak,/ Redolent of coffee or like infusions/ that linger on walls of faded chintz/ now rubbed with darkness and the gold of time,/ Here the world turns on the ear of a page,/ Here are forests of words and whispers./ Here the souls of the dead collect/ and are revived./ We would speak with the wise and they oblige./ When books are opened, suns rise./ They outshine these lamps of bottle green glass./ When books shut, worlds end./ But we remain seduced by those we cannot see./ And in the delicious solitude that remains,/ the serpent arrives, desiring to converse."

Another much-awaited book was Victor Peñaranda's *Voyage in Dry Season* (Sipat Publications). In his introduction, which he calls "A Personal Journey," the poet says: "My initial batch of handwritten poems and typewritten poems were lost in a taxi. But it didn't really matter because I was very much in love. Soon enough I found out that writing is irresistible, a magnetic tide I cannot do without. It's like falling in love."

This Palanca prize-winning poet traveled all over the country in his capacity as a social-development worker. Later, he joined the Department of Foreign Affairs and has been recently posted in Germany. Clear imagery and lean lines characterize his poetry, as shown in his poem "Homecoming." It goes: "Four jeepney rides and a forced walk/ Obviously are no cure for a hangover/ The gate screeches at my touch/ Early morning breeze rocking/ The leaves to the brink of madness;/ On the driveway, three fallen/ White flowers vie to let me in . . . / There is no adequate reply to such a welcome."

In the book trade, nonfiction is a catchall term that refers to a whole range of books, from references to books of essays, both personal and formal. This year saw a good harvest of such books.

The irrepressible Dr. Margarita Go Singco Holmes published *Naiibang Pag-ibig: Ang Maging Bakla sa Pilipinas* (Anvil), the Filipino edition of her bestselling book *A Different Love: Being Gay in the Philippines* (Anvil, 1993). Translated by Gilbert D. Francia and D.M. Reyes of the Ateneo de Manila University, this book fearlessly tackles such topics as gay parents (yes, they exist) and the collision between religion and homosexuality.

As University of the Philippines professor Michael L. Tan puts it in his introduction: "Ang librong ito'y hindi 'lamang' para sa mga bakla, lesbiyana, o para sa mga nag-aalangang kaibigan at kamag-anak. Naririto ang isang libro na tumutuligsa sa doble-karang pamantayan ng lipunang Filipino, at sabay parangal [din] sa kakayahan natin bilang bayan na mag-isip para sa sarili, sa paraang rasyonal at moral, sa halip na walang-kibong tanggapin [na] lamang ang nakatutuliling dikta sa atin ng mga mangmang na tagapagtanggol ng seksuwal na moralidad. . . . Hinahamon tayo ng *Naiibang*

*Pag-ibig* na halukayin ang ugat ng ating insekuridad, ng mga hadlang na sa sandaling mabuwag ay maaaring magpakita kung paanong ang magmahal at mahalín ay hindi naman talaga gaanong magkaiba."

Dr. Doreen G. Fernandez is a professor at the Ateneo de Manila University and chair of its Department of Communication. Her latest book, *Face to Face: The Craft of Interviewing* (Cacho), is meant not only for students and researchers but also for "almost any member of our society who needs to find out something relevant to his/her life or work: the housewife retrieving family recipes from her grandmother; the chronicler . . . piecing together a family history from elders' memories; the roving reporter assigned to find out what the man on the street thinks about a 'hot' issue; the grade school student assigned to retrieve a folktale; the high school student who dreams of speaking with his favorite athlete; the employer seeking the right employee for a particular job; and the historian who wants to fill in the gaps between archives, memoirs, official statistics, and human lives." Dr. Fernandez conveys her experience and techniques with insight and clarity.

The back cover of N.V.M. Gonzalez's new book, *Work on the Mountain* (UP Press), lists the categories of cultural history, criticism, and autobiography, showing at first glance the broad sweep and scope of this book. Aside from being one of our foremost fictionists, Mr. Gonzalez is also a cultural critic of the first order. While he does not have the language of the postmodernists, he can still draw out the most startling readings from a panopoly of texts.

This book brings together in one volume several materials that have been out of print. "In the Workshop of Time and Tide" was published as an appendix to Dr. Gonzalez's *Mindoro and Beyond: Twenty-One Stories* (UP Press, 1979). *Kalutang* was issued by Kalikasan Press in 1991 in a limited edition of 300 copies. UP Press first published the six essays in *The Father and the Maid*, which were originally lectures delivered from November 1988 to January 1989, when Dr. Gonzalez was an international writer-in-residence at the University of the Philippines. Richard R. de Guzman's essay, "As in Myth, the Signs were All Over," was first published in the prestigious *Virginia Quarterly Review*. And Professor Oscar Campomanes of the University of California in Berkeley gives a counterblast to a U.S.-based critic (Epifanio San Juan Jr.?) who once excoriated N.V.M. Gonzalez and Bienvenido N. Santos for seeking "roots in a bygone rural Philippines seen from the eyes of a Hemingway or Katherine Anne Porter—a rural space no longer mapped by American anthropologists like Alfred Kroeber or Felix Keesing, but by insurgents."

Finally, two of today's youngest and most popular columnists also published their books.

True to his reputation as a prolific writer, Ambeth Ocampo came out not with one, but with *three* books this year. In March there was *Bonifacio's Bolo* (Anvil), which newspaper editor Letty Magsanoc describes as "meticulous,

methodical, and delightful." *Mabini's Ghost*, also from Anvil, was published in December. In between, there was De La Salle University's *Talking History: Conversations with Teodoro A. Agoncillo*, which was so controversial that lawyers advised the deletion of several lines from the transcribed interviews. This book was sold out as soon as it came out. Well and good, because that means DLSU can now change the book's atrocious cover design.

*Twisted* (Anvil) is the celebrated compilation of Jessica Zafra's nastier columns in the daily *Today*. Jessica dislikes the terms "role model" or "icon," but she is that—a voice cynical, worldly, and wise—to the under-30 generation of readers. Her second book this year, *Womenagerie and Other Tales from the Front*, also from Anvil, gathers her earlier columns in *Woman Today*. Sadly, it also fell victim to the fire that gutted the Anvil warehouse. Pending a reprint, the copies you see at National Bookstore are the last.

But I am confident that like the phoenix, the brave band of writers, artists, and publishers that comprise this booming industry will shake the ashes off their wings and soar again in 1996.