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Penmanship and Other Stories, by Dalisay

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Penmanship and Other Stories. By Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr. Mandaluyong: Cacho Publishing House, 1995. 168 pages.

Penmanship and Other Stories, the latest book of stories by Jose Y. Dalisay Jr., is handsomely designed by Ramon C. Sunico and comes from the imprint of Cacho Publishing House.

This is Dalisay's fifth book and his third collection of stories, after *Oldtimers* (1984, Asphodel) and *Sarcophagus* (1992, University of the Philippines Press). Three of his earlier books have won National Book Awards from the Manila Critics Circle. He is described by critics as "one of the masters of Filipino short fiction in English"—and one of the few still writing fiction until now.

The book is printed on special offset paper. It is lovely creamy paper, unlike the glaring whiteness you often find in our bookpaper editions. *Penmanship* is a book whose pages you would love to inhale.

But there are also riches inside. I have read some of the stories in the weekly magazines—short, sharp stories that satirize ever so subtly such proclivities as social climbing ("Except Felisa"), the life of a doctor by day and dirty old man by night ("Ybarra"), the pretensions of what publisher and editor Teodoro Locsin Jr. called the ignorati—*ignoranteng* culturati ("At the Booklaunching"). This last story also shows the heart of emptiness inside the writer whose book, ironically, is being launched.

Right off the bat, the book begins with a story of seduction called, "Desert." A Marxist professor and his hopelessly bourgeois former student meet again, and try to bring each other to bed in between mouthfuls of the richest Black Forest. Dalisay also spent a month in that Shangri-la of writers, the fabled Hawthornden Castle in Lasswade, Midlothian, Scotland. You stay there for a month, with free board and lodging, and do nothing else in the world but write. Dalisay did buckle down to work, polished some stories for this collection, and wrote new ones.

One of the newly minted ones is "We Global Men," in which a Filipino in Scotland—neither waiter nor menial hand—smugly reflects on the comforts of his upper-middle-class existence. Part of Asia's rising business class, he is in Edinburgh to close another deal. But in a fair, among a stack of postcards called "The Orient, Etc.," he picks up a photograph of three brown girls taken at Manila, the Philippine Islands, on 14 November 1910.

Woe to him, or her, who implies that Dalisay does not know his postcolonial theory. He does—and shows us vividly, painfully, how it is to be a Filipino in a foreign land. Even with your double-breasted suit, your liquid accents, your plastic cards, you are still a second-, even third-class, citizen.

First published in *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5 August 1995.

Dalisay sharpens his postcolonial gaze further in the short novel "Voyager," a masterly homage to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer*. There is even a sly reference to Conrad himself toward the latter part of "Voyager." The novel brings us back to the nineteenth century. Farolan, the governor-general's hatchet man; Meliton Gimenez, the young *revolucionario*; and Nervez, the *I* persona, are the characters that triangulate this brew of suspense and romance.

But easily the finest of the lot is the title story, "Penmanship," one of the most moving I have read in memory. Its poignancy reminds you of James Joyce's "Eveline," or Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*.

Like the author, the old bachelor has a passion for old fountain pens.

"It wasn't him but the pen, gliding across the foolscap, filling in the vastness of the page with words that may have not meant all that much but which looked beautiful because of the personality and the infinite variety of their shape."

Then a young, blind woman—cool and self-possessed—begins to work in his office, seemingly ready to take over when he retires.

Weeks later, she asks him to pen a most painful letter to her former boyfriend, who abandons her. It is a proud letter, and the man dutifully writes her words down, although his heart was beginning to break.

And when he goes home that night, something has already changed inside him. No longer is he the emotionally barren man who loved only T.S. Eliot's deathless poetry. "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."

So very like this story, and this beautiful book of stories.

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Imagining the Nation in Four Philippine Novels. By Maria Teresa Martinez-Sicat. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1994. 152 pages.

Literature is one way of knowing a people's self-concept and worldview. Martinez-Sicat uses this idea to explore the concept of "nation" which Filipinos had in the revolution against Spain and the war against the United States as reflected in four Philippine novels. The novels are Maximo Kalaw's *The Filipino Rebel: A Romance of American Occupation in the Philippines*, F. Sionil Jose's *Po-on*, Linda Ty-Casper's *The Three-Cornered Sun*, and Alfred A. Yuson's *The Great Philippine Jungle Energy Cafe*. This revised doctoral dissertation's