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Roles We Play in Family Life, by Holmes

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The essays are travelogues written in retrospect, but woven in between the detailed narrations of side streets, architectural details, amazing nooks, hidden treasures, trinkets, and overheard conversations become stories of overseas Filipinos the author had met. Her inclusion of overseas Filipinos in her essays does not come off as contrived or pretentious, as if she were making a desperate attempt to write something socially relevant. Rather, her narrations on fascinating countries come across as refreshingly candid, told by a wandering traveller reflecting on previous experiences and punctuated by an encounter with a fellow Filipino. Thus her essays become epiphanies of sorts about the condition of the Filipino abroad. For example, in "Europe through the Eyes of a Filipina English Major," Hidalgo depicts her stay with Tina, a Filipina residing in Geneva. Within the innocent narration, Tina's words about her own life jump out toward the reader, and give one a glimpse of the true condition of the overseas Filipino.

"What do you think I'm forever trying to prove? That I'm as good as the next woman, of course. But I can only do that by doing her one better, speaking better, living better. It's either that or I change the color of my skin . . . I'm not talking of overt racism. There's none of that here. People are basically fair and courteous. But there's always a difference. And one is always aware of it." (p. 56)

I Remember . . . Travel Essays is a delightful collection, and Hidalgo successfully provides an alternative in travel writing, as her writing gives us a view of the world from the eyes of a Filipino woman.

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Roles We Play in Family Life. By Margarita Go-Singco Holmes. Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 1992. 286 pages.

This book is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature relating Psychology and Philippine life.

Culled from the author's daily columns in *Manila Times*, the book follows a simple format of correspondence between the letter-writer to the author and the author's response to various issues: from child-rearing to adolescent questionings, from sensitive issues like incest to alcoholism, and many more. The author presents the concerns of the letter-writer with clarity and perceptiveness. It is very refreshing to follow through some situations where the conversation between the letter-writer and the author extends to a number of columns. There

is a willingness on the part of the author to accompany the letter-writer in her personal journey. On page 246, the author writes:

It will certainly be good for all of us to walk this walk with you and learn from your questions and your pain. We want to be there every step of the way, from Crying Lady to not necessarily a Laughing Lady, but certainly a more serene and confident one . . . yes, no matter how long it takes.

I will pick out three strengths of the book and three suggestions.

I admire the author for naturally coming from a compassionate stance. She understands the predicament of her letter-writers. She has the ability to read "in-between" the lines. For example, on page 256, the author responds to an "almost affair" between a mother and a son: "Dear Jocasta '90, Thank you very much for your letter, one that must have been extremely difficult for you to write. Actually putting pen to paper and describing what went on between your son and you must have been very painful . . ."

Second, the author is excellent in terms of trying to see the situation in a new and positive light ("re-framing"/"re-labeling," in therapy language). For the reader, this becomes a source of inspiration and new energy. In a letter on "When Money is a Problem," the author, in addition to her natural empathy, responds thus:

You, who have been most directly and adversely affected not only by Mt. Pinatubo but also by the sudden withdrawal of Clark Air Base did not resort to cheap shots of blame-laying, fear-mongering, and emotional blackmail. You, who have had your whole world pulled from under your feet, have the dignity and the wherewithal to wonder about love, family and yes, even sovereignty. *Sovereignty* in its truest sense. You, who have, it would seem, as much 'right' as President Aquino, Senators Lina and Herrera to grovel, beg, and blame have risen above all these and are looking towards the future. Your relatives may hate you for your inability to be as free with money as you used to be. But many of us who have read your letter and can relate to your plight are all the wiser, all the richer, and yes, all the freer, because you dared dream the dreams you dreamed and ask about the things that mattered most. Thank you, Mr. Bamba, and may your tribe increase. (p. 105)

Third, the author has the ability to make adequate referrals to books or people to consult. This is a good indication of fairness to the people who come to us. It means we know our limits and we think of the best way to respond to those who need help. In "On the Meanings of Fatherhood," the author writes:

Dear Misunderstood Father: I will now share an excellent theoretical model formulated by Allen Tan, Ph.D., which aims to show how men

conceive and act out the role of father in their lives. Dr. Tan is president of the Psychological Association of the Philippines and a professor of psychology at Ateneo de Manila University. I have shared this model with many male clients who have concerns about their parenting role. (p. 60)

Now, for some suggestions.

First, I wish the author also referred the people who seek remarriage or contemplating on marriage to try also premarital counseling (p. 195). One of the core issues before marriage is to have the strength to say goodbye or create a healthy distance (or independence) from the family. This is very important because in the Philippine setting, the marital bond is not as clear in relation to the bonds of family.

Second, one of the findings in dysfunctional families is lack of psychological boundaries or lack of respect for the person. The findings of Murray Bowen and Salvador Minuchin, two of the important founders in family therapy, may help clarify many of the cases being presented in the letters. The series on "Inlaws, Outlaws" by Nanette (pp. 186-196) may be helped by knowing how to be "differentiated" (defining the self) or having "clear boundaries" in the family system.

Third, while an author may be free to take any moral stance, it may be wiser to respect also the religious sensibilities of the readers. While the author spoke out negatively about a mother hiring a high-class callgirl for the son because this response just muddles the family dynamics, the author continues:

If he feels the need to release his sexual tensions he can masturbate, find a meaningful relationship with someone where sexual intercourse may or may not be included, go out with a girl who will agree to 'everything but' or, if need be, even pay for his own prostitute. If you get the callgirl for him, you will still be a very active part of his sexual psyche. He is already 18, Jocasta. It is time he learned about life by living it. Hopefully, one of his lessons in life will be that we do not always get what we want sexually, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. (p. 263)

This may be partly right, but I believe part of growing up is for parents or even authority figures to offer sound and solid ethical principles and then, let the person decide in the light of his or her unique faith tradition.

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