

## Learning to Love Books

It was very fortunate that I grew up in a household where reading and intellectual pursuits were the norm. With respect to reading, the footsteps I followed most were those of my eldest brother Augusto, although no one ever called him that. Born in 1919, he was always Toto, long before Dorothy and her pet Toto in the Wizard of Oz. A banker who worked nearly fifty years for the Philippine National Bank and its subsidiaries, he lived at home till he was 35. His days of bachelorhood ended when he was sent to New York by the bank and meeting Lourdes, the daughter of a Filipino diplomat. He took her home as a bride. Lourdes is still with us today, turning 80 this month (Nov. 2011).

Toto was 20 years and ten months older than me and he was already in his early thirties when I was in the equivalent of middle school. We occupied the same room built over a one car detached garage at our home in Manila. He read voraciously and had shelves full of magazines and books in our bachelor's quarters. He either subscribed or got magazines through the bank but he always had the latest issues of Time and Life magazines and bought books by the dozen. I got to read most of them. The 1950's were the heyday of the news and photo magazines. Competing with Time and Life were Newsweek and Look which we saw once in a while. I improved my vocabulary by having Time magazine on one hand and a dictionary in the other. The books Toto had were mostly by either American or European authors. There were John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway, both Nobel Prize winners in literature. Steinbeck gave us *Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden* and *Tortilla flats*. They were written in the 1930's but my brother had them in his collection so I read them in the 1950's. Hemingway became a favorite after reading *The Sun Also Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*. I continued to read Hemingway's books that were published posthumously such as *A Moveable Feast* and *The Dangerous Summer*. James Michener's books were starting to get published then, like *Tales of the South Pacific* and *Return to Paradise*. I read a few of his later books like *Texas* and *Iberia*. Michener's books were typically voluminous so I didn't read too many of them. The movie was a lot more famous than the book but we read James Jones' *From Here to Eternity*.

From Europe, Toto had the classics of Dante Alighieri; *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. I tried reading Machiavelli's *Il Principe* but it was beyond my then fifteen year old brain. I appreciated it better decades later. Another Italian author was Alberto Moravia with his *The Woman of Rome* and *Two Women*. From England we had *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence. I don't recall reading any other books by Orwell and Lawrence. From Russia we had the works of Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Boris Pasternak.

I went to San Beda College, a Catholic school run by Benedictine monks. They took literature seriously and as part of our literature class we read Shakespeare and Chaucer. My favorite was *Julius Caesar* and I can still recall some of the words of Mark Anthony's funeral oration. We read and dissected Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. It is odd and unfortunate but we didn't have a Bible class then. People of my generation who went to school here in the U.S. also recall not having Bible classes.

You might ask why there weren't any Filipino authors. For whatever reason, there aren't many full length books or novels written by Filipinos. Two novels, written by national hero Jose Rizal, occupy an important place in Philippine history. They are *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, published in 1887 and 1891. They were perceived to be anti-cleric and anti-Catholic so we were not exposed to them. My siblings and I all went to Catholic schools so Rizal's works were never in the curriculum. When the Philippine

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Congress tried to pass a law requiring schools to include “Noli” and “Fili” in their curriculum, the church hierarchy went on a warpath mode. But the law passed in 1956 and I wonder how uniformly it is followed by the Catholic schools. I read the books much later.

There was then and continuing today, a proliferation of newspapers and magazines in Manila. In the rest of the world, print media circulation is declining thanks to the internet and electronic gadgets, but not in Manila. Every newspaper has a small army of columnists, each pontificating on their issue of the day. I would dearly love to see former presidents, military officers and cabinet ministers write about their experience. There are three living ex-presidents – Fidel Ramos, Joseph Estrada and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. I haven’t seen anything written by them. The late Corazon Aquino had plenty of time but didn’t write or authorize anyone to write her biography. Excluding those who died in office, none of the others wrote about their presidencies. I have yet to learn of any former General writing his memoirs. What happened during the unending campaigns to stop the insurgent groups in Luzon or the Moro separatists in Mindanao? Only an on the ground general can really tell us. Contrast all these with the American experience. Only three years after the end of the Bush term, the President, Vice-President, Secretary of State, Generals and even unknown bureaucrats have written their versions of history. Perhaps the current Philippine president Noynoy Aquino will humor us. He will only be 56 when his term ends and without a wife and children, he should have plenty of time. I am hoping.

But all is not lost. One current Filipino author is F. Sionil Jose who has written prodigiously on quite a variety of subjects ranging from essays to novels to short stories and even children’s books. Every Filipino should read his *Why We Are Poor*, a collection of essays and columns. But he is in his late eighties so someone needs to step up. I hereby nominate him for the Nobel Prize.

Thank you Toto. Thank you Benedictine fathers.

“We shouldn't teach great books; we should teach a love of reading.”