

## **Growing up Filipino II: More stories for young adults.**

Edited by Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, 2010. Santa Monica,  
CA: PALH. 280 pp.

BENEDICT Anderson once described an uncomfortable paradox for Filipino writers. How was it that the Spanish administration, with its general disregard for educational welfare, produced such literary luminaries as José Rizal and his contemporaries? And why had no writers of equivalent stature emerged from the US system, which had championed universal education?

To venture a possible explanation: the works of the *ilustrados* reflected the heroic values of their time, while writing produced after the introduction of the US school system was to some extent doomed to emulate the tepid style of school readers and comprehension exercises. *Growing Up Filipino II* is an anthology of Filipino young-adult fiction that appears to wrestle with this problem, and the results are unexpected.

Although the volume that preceded this one was reported to have been a success, it is hard to see why. From a marketing point of view, the didactic dullness of a title such as *Growing Up Filipino II* is unlikely to persuade prospective readers to pull the book off the shelf. And the excruciatingly prolix introduction seems purpose-built to discourage any further venturing. Before reaching the stories, the exhausted reader would learn of “the simultaneous differences and interconnections that make Filipino/American writing such a potent source of insight into ethnic configurations of self,” and that the volume’s “plural and palimpsestic approach privileges association as a creative reading strategy that configures a wider scope for the enactment of transcultural subjects.”

Perversely enough, many of the anthologized tales contradict such inanities. You cannot help getting the sense that these 25 Filipino writers—from both the Philippines itself and the diaspora—are pushing against the cookie-cutter scholasticism expected of them by their publisher. Certainly, there are a few who descend into self-conscious moralism, identifying “issues” for their passive audience as if addressing a

rehabilitation workshop for juvenile delinquents. But most stories are so wonderfully original as to resist all attempts at a suffocating poststructural or postcolonialist interpretation. Read, for example, Charles Ong's "A Season of 10,000 Noses," a tale so plausible and strange as to invite comparisons with the literary traditions of other former colonies of Spain in Latin America. In the same vein, Jonathan Jimena Siason's "Old Witch of San Jose" and Marianne Villanueva's "Black Dog" are told effortlessly in the comfortable style of good old barrio narration. Oscar Peñaranda's "The Price" exploits Filipino storytelling conventions only to upset them—the expectation of the miraculous is unfulfilled, leaving a harsh reality to fill the narrative vacuum. Likewise, Dean Francis Alfar's "Something Like That" describes a widely reported tragedy in Manila made all the more poignant with the repetition of that iconic Philippine English idiom that provides the story with its title.

Stories of the diaspora experience dominate the collection, but these are less satisfying, perhaps because they are not informed by any coherent "tradition" (even to react against stylistic conventions is to be oriented to them in some measure). It is the diaspora authors that have a tendency to give in, ever so slightly, to the temptation to be instructive rather than imaginative.

Surrounded by parents, teachers, and other symbols of authority, young adults do not want to be ambushed in their reading materials, and it is no surprise to me that JK Rowling enjoys as much of a following among young people in the Philippines as elsewhere in the world. After all, *Harry Potter* never pauses to tell you what to do or think.

Read this book, but do not be fooled by the fluffy promises of "transculturality" and "discourses of ethnicity." The writers prove that young-adult fiction comes of age when it leaves the classroom behind.

Piers Kelly

Australian National University