

Oral history and a poetry prize

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Prof. Kirpal Singh interviews former president Fidel V. Ramos for the Asian Centre for Oral History

Our long-time friend who wears many hats (despite a turban), Prof. Kirpal Singh, was in town for a day exactly a week ago to accomplish a couple of tasks. The first was to conduct a video-taped interview with former president Fidel V. Ramos, and the second to award a poetry prize to a young Filipina. And we were fortunate to be with him in both activities.

Poet and associate professor of English Literature at Singapore Management University (SMU) where he is also the founding director of the Wee Kim Wee Centre (WKWC), Kirpal has been globally acknowledged as a creativity guru who engages “with central questions pertaining to the entire notion of creativity especially as it manifests itself across cultures and political borders.”

Since his 2004 authorship of *Thinking Hats & Coloured Turbans: Creativity Across Cultures*, he has lectured at MIT, Yale, Columbia, Cambridge, Warwick, Copenhagen, Vienna, and conducted intensive creativity workshops in Florence, Barcelona, Greece, Dublin, and New York, among other cities.

He is the first non-American to be elected to the board of directors of the American Creativity Association, of which he is now the vice president. His latest book is *Naked Ape, Naked Boss*, a biography of former Wildlife Reserves Singapore chief Bernard Harrison.

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Kirpal had long been assigned to conduct the interview with FVR by the Institute for Societal Leadership (ISL), which SMU established to advance an applied understanding of “Societal Leadership” in Southeast Asia. ISL has in turn founded the Asian Centre for Oral History (ACOH) as an “online repository of stories of individuals who have shaped or contributed to Asia’s collective history, and whose actions have had an impact on society.”

Per Prof. Singh, ACOH will be a bank of Asian Leadership stories that showcase decision-making wisdom in the cultural context of Asia, “with special focus on the interviewee’s experiences in leadership positions, their key decision-making moments, their motivations and thought processes behind those decisions, and their thoughts on other leaders whom they encountered in their careers.”

Through the on-cam conversations, ACOH seeks to elicit the interviewee’s take on historical events that they witnessed or participated in, so as to capture the region’s history and evolution. Among recent interviewees have been Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, Malaysia’s former secretary for Transport, and Datok Dominic Puthucheary, a distinguished Malaysian lawyer and one-time associate of Lee Kuan Yew’s.

On Prof. Singh’s to-do list are Cambodia’s first woman doctor, Dr Pung (also known as Kek), who heads the NGO Licardo, and Cheah Vannath, arguably the foremost commentator on Cambodia’s political/social landscape.

In our consideration, of course President Ramos trumps the list by far. He certainly fits the bill, as someone who has not only contributed significantly to Asia’s collective history, but whose participation in historical events has been writ large. He has engaged with a myriad of other leaders, with his strategic decisions having involved dramatic moments. Then too, he remains eminently knowledgeable and highly articulate on global matters, particularly on socio-political questions and strategic historical concerns.



Kirpal awards the Merit Prize for a Singapore-based international poetry contest to Carissa Mae Almazan. STAR

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We were happy to have helped arrange for the session, happier still to see the former president in top form — from the initial psy-op tactic of intimidating his guests by telling them how to conduct the activity (from modifying the choice of setting in his office to the actual placement of cameras), to finally acknowledging the ploy with his wry brand of humor.

Our Singaporean guests from ACOH felt thoroughly fulfilled and grateful for the opportunity. As soon as he flew back home, Kirpal wasted no time in e-mailing his enthusiastic recollection.

“It was a most interesting conversation. The ex-President has such a good memory it made me realize they don’t make ’em as they used to! FVR was frank, open, insightful, sharing much that is essential to a strong historical awareness of what shaped his sensibility as well as the larger frames of the ASEAN region. Being both a professional army man and then the Head of the Nation meant that here was someone who knew a lot about security, strategy and survival. He remains a masterhand at these, even now.

“Our conversation began with him singing the great virtue of taking three spoonfuls of virgin coconut oil every day! He swears by this! And when our discussion ended, nearly 90 minutes later, he was still dynamically recalling names, dates and events while I was starting to feel flagged!

“A great man, charming, witty, knowledgeable, wise. The Philippines is blessed to have such a powerful, forceful and active person to serve as a resource, a very rich and meaningful resource. And, by association, we too in Singapore as members of the larger ASEAN community!”

Straight from that interview session, Kirpal and I proceeded to join a group of literary friends at Sev’s Café (in Legazpi Towers on Roxas Blvd., right across the Cultural Center of the Philippines) for his second activity for the day, the awarding of a poetry prize he had established.

The International Poetry Contest of Writing Ventures 2013 had promised a hefty US\$10,000 grand prize for a single poem entry of whatever theme and no more than 25 lines. But the judges — Tina Chang of NYC, Dennis Haskell of Australia, and Prof. Singh himself — could only select three winners for Merit Prizes worth US\$1,000 each, besides settling for additional meritorious entries for publication in the online WV Best Poems of 2013 anthology.

The latter roster included poems by our very own Isabela Banzon and Mark Anthony Cayanan, while the three Merit Prize winners were Amanda Chong of Singapore, Sarah Rice of Australia, and Carissa Mae Almazan of the Philippines.

Only last Monday did the opportunity present itself for the awarding of Ms. Almazan’s prize, for her poem titled “&” — which reads as follows:

“On the day I first loved you,/ I thought of your funeral// and your dark wooden coffin /—exactly the way you wanted// the greyness that your hair has/ become from the way you wear it now:// so loosely and petulantly, the way / you hold my hand— as if all this// was meant for gods and goddesses/ who live forever. Shadows under// your eyes have been covered up:/ Now I cannot see the sleepless// nights we spent in bed, arguing/ pillows flying, tears flowing// until you stared at the ceiling; I, at / the glaring light of the bathroom// door we have left ajar. We are/ unmoving: together.// your eyes

have been covered up:/ Now I cannot see the sleepless// nights we spent in bed, dancing/
into each others' spaces and holes// filling what was never there with/ what is here now: now that
I have// you to be found. We are/ moving: together, still.// And when the gravel falls and/
flowers wilt. In my head:// you are no more. Rather: here./
And I finally see the beauty// of how it would be to build an/
ampersand between us.”

Isa Almazan, a student of ours in Ateneo a few years ago, confesses to being shy and almost reclusive, thus mostly out of the loop of creative writers of her age. She writes poems for herself, not one of which she's even dared to submit for any publication.

Much of her writing, she says, can be found in magazines such as STATUS and other publications from Summit Media and Hinge Inquirer Publishing. She wrote for MTV during 2013, but has of late concentrated on freelance work for Ateneo as a writer and editor, while also doing writing and research for television networks.

An AdMU AB Communication graduate, Minor in AB Literature – English, she has worked for ABS-CBN as writer and researcher for over half a year. Among the shows she's worked on is “The Bottomline with Boy Abunda.”

She brought a friend and her proud father along to Sev's Café for the celebratory dinner and awarding, after which we requested her to read her poem. After all, the venue we selected has become the only regular one in Metro Manila for poetry readings and slam poetry competitions.

Others in the company of poets followed her suit, going Open Mic, among them the esteemed Jimmy Abad and Marne Kilates, as well as Juaniyo Arcellana, his better half Grace Monte de Ramos, Philippines Graphic literary editor Alma Anonas-Carpio, and her precocious 18-year-old twins Sabrina and Alessandra Anonas.

Content to be among the audience were Kirpal's UP-based academic associates Lily Rose Tope and her husband Dick, poet Isabela Banzon, author Susan Lara, Graphic EIC Joel Pablo Salud and his co-writer wife Che Sarigumba, and Grace Bañez, whose belated Yuletide gifts of La Filipina canned goods for this writer were much appreciated.

Kirpal also announced that entries to the Writing Ventures 2014 contest are currently being judged. The awards ceremony will soon be held in Singapore, with the top prizes having been increased to: US\$12,000 for 1st Prize, US\$6,000 for 2nd Prize, and US\$3,000 for 3rd Prize. The contest is annual, so that the 2015 edition is now calling for submissions for unpublished single-entry poems.

From interviewing Asian leaders to awarding poetry prizes — now, that was all in a day's work for a globe-trotting creativity guru.