

Another summer in Silliman

PENMAN By Butch Dalisay (The Philippine Star) | Updated May 20, 2013 - 12:00am



Tambobo Bay through Karl Aguila's picture window

Last week had me enacting another familiar ritual sitting on the panel of the 52nd edition of the Silliman University National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete City. The oldest of all the country's literary workshops, Silliman's is also the longest at three weeks a format it has retained for many decades now, certainly since I was a fellow myself in 1981. Three weeks of poetry, ocean, and boozing by starlight may be a young writer's dream escapade, but old geezers like us panelists can't take that much time off from the more mundane claims of life, so we sign up for no more than a week, and this year I took the middle week.

I shared the week's paneling duties with a couple of old friends: the prizewinning short story writer and now Silliman workshop director Susan Lara and the Mindanao-based poet and retired rocker Ricky de Ungria, as well as the La Salle-based playwright and historian Vic Torres and a poet and car mechanic that the workshop flew in from Hong Kong, David McKirdy. (David's "car mechanic" tag isn't just being cute — that's his real profession, and an enviable one it is, since he specializes in repairing vintage Rolls Royces, and flies around the world to revive Silver Shadows from the 1930s and such.)

Quite by chance, this panel acquired a trademark of sorts: David and I turned up in the panama hats we'd been accustomed to wearing, and Susan also sported a black hat, prompting Ricky and Vic to procure hats themselves, and soon the panel resembled a gathering of Mafiosi or mandarins.

On the other side of the table were this year's fellows: Corina Marie B. Arenas, Nolin Adrian de Pedro, Patricia Mariya Shishikura, Brylle Bautista Tabora, and Lyde Gerard Villanueva for poetry; Tracey de la Cruz, Sophia Marie Lee, Rhea Politado, and Patricia Verzo for fiction; Jennifer de la Rosa Balboa, Ana Felisa Lorenzo, and Arnie Q. Mejia for creative nonfiction; and Mario Mendez for drama. In addition, two special fellows joined the workshop from Singapore: Christine Leow and Nurul Asyikin from Singapore Management University.

Every batch of fellows is arguably unique and different from its predecessors, but writers and workshops being what they are, the panelists will often find themselves dealing with the same old problems and challenges, albeit in new manifestations. Last week, in our sessions at the Rose Lamb Sobrepeña Writers Village in Camp Lookout in Valencia, we found an abundance of fresh writing talent, but also the need, as ever, to bring focus and refinement into the work of young wards.



I'll spare you the usual writing lesson (don't worry, you'll get an earful in the weeks to come, as I have more workshops on the schedule), but this week I kept hearing myself muttering my mantras: 1) "Raise the stakes, and push the narrative!"; 2) "Why this day, and why this hour? Choose the best point of attack for your story!"; and 3) "Think cinematically! What's in the frame? How far way are we from what we're looking at?"

Thankfully it wasn't all work, and there were timeouts aplenty from the daily dose of criticism that the fellows got.

A high point of the week was Wednesday spent at Antulang Beach Resort in Siaton, about an hour from downtown Dumaguete. Run by the very amiable and capable Anabelle Lee-Adriano and her husband Edu, Antulang alone is one great reason to fly in to Dumaguete and to spend a long week or weekend there. The 11-hectare, 48-room resort runs along a strip of white beach lapped by crystalline blue-green water, and while the resort itself stands high above the water, a path winds down to the beach, with the vertical distance providing some privacy for bathers and beachcombers. (For a glimpse of what we saw and experienced, check out Antulang's website here: <http://www.antulang.com/new/main.html>.)

When you get tired of the beach, Antulang offers an alternative that I daresay no other beach resort in the whole archipelago has: thousands of good books in its Edith L. Tiempo Reading Room, a cozy little corner devoted to Dumaguete's literary mother. I was very pleased to sign two books of mine that were on the shelves, but even more fun was talking with Edu and Annabelle about books and movies we all remembered and liked—the novels and autobiographical works of Han Suyin (after whom the Adrianos' daughter Suyen was named), and *The Seventh Dawn* starring Capucine and William Holden. Anyone who likes Han Suyin and Capucine are friends of mine!



As a bonus, the Adrianos brought us to the nearby house of their friend Karl Aguila, one of the country's brightest young talents in sculpture and design. There's no better showcase of Karl's work than the sandstone-colored house itself, perched on a promontory overlooking scenic Tambobo Bay. With Mt. Talinis on the opposite side, it was just the sort of place where fabulous novels might get located, if not written.

A candlelit poolside dinner was also tendered on the fellows' and panelists' behalf by Simon Stack and his wife Virginia (or "Tata"), with Simon's gracious mom Joanna assisting them with the hosting. The Stacks have transplanted themselves from New York and the Bahamas to settle in Dumaguete, where Tata helps run a school for Koreans. Simon and Tata have become welcome and welcoming members of Dumaguete's cultural community, and whether he's playing the sitar, reciting Milton from memory, or rapping like a New York gangsta — which he did in the after-dinner reading — Simon shows how comfortable he feels in the bosom of that community.

Again I'd like to thank the workshop sponsors — the NCCA, the Edilberto and Edith Tiempo Creative Writing Center, the United Board of Christian Higher Education in Asia, the US Embassy, and, of course, Silliman University — for having me over and making these memorable encounters possible. Thanks, too, to workshop coordinator Ian Casocot for facilitating everything.

Next up in my datebook: the Iligan writers workshop, where I'll be by the time you read this.

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On a side note, and just as I expected, my piece on fountain-pen repair a few weeks ago — as esoteric as it may have sounded to many — generated quite a number of responses and inquiries from readers, and fresh sign-ups at our fountain-pen club at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/fpn-p/>. I'm always pleasantly surprised by how many people out there remember writing with pens, and still enjoy doing so despite the general shift from letters to digits in our daily life.

I'm almost ashamed to report that despite my crazy summer schedule, I managed to squeeze in a week-long trip to the US in early May, ostensibly to pick my mother up in Virginia and to accompany her home, but also to make a quick two-day trip to the Midwest for the 2013 Chicago Pen Show, to gorge on an overdose of vintage Parkers, Sheaffers, Watermans, and nearly every other pen maker known to man. This is what the boy in me slaves away at all kinds of tedious jobs for: a day at the toy store, also known as pen heaven.

If you have any questions about your fountain pens — whether they're heirlooms from your grandfather's drawer or the pen you sign big contracts with — I'd be happy to try and answer them by email, time permitting. (To answer in advance a common question about value, I'd urge you to go online to ebay.com, and do a search for your pen under the "Completed" listings. That will give you a fair idea of how much your pen is worth in today's market — which, I should forewarn you, will often be much less than the sentimental value you or your family might attach to the object.)

And if you feel like disposing of that useless old pen that won't write, let me be your trashcan.