

The Writing Workshop: Its support, practice, and value

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Abstract

This short paper delivered as a keynote speech tackles the value and popularity of writing workshops. It gives a historical perspective on the support, practice and value of writing and writers workshops. It defines historical fiction and challenges academic institutions especially, to look upon historical fiction as a way of understanding the present.

Keywords: Creative writing, historical fiction, myth, talent, sense of past

Amid the social, economic and political problems our country is facing today there is a need for writers and the academe, birthplace of the country's workshops, to affirm the staying power of literature and to show that literature is relevant to our society because it has always been in literature where our aesthetic values have reflected our moral values. Aside from this, people tend to forget that most great works of art begin with the word, and from the word, because imaginative, therefore, immortal.

Unlike political figures, movie actors, and sports personalities, writers have no power nor mass base but, the ironic thing is that with his imagination, a writer like Tolstoy can show us Natasha dancing before a mirror; or, with Shakespeare, from the poet's pen, not from a

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historian's, Cleopatra turns phenomenal but human in her struggle to stay in power and in her love for Mark Anthony.

From our own writers, we have Jose Rizal's 'Noli me tangere' giving us the 19th century Philippine landscape; Edilberto K. Tiempo's *More than Conquerors* narrating about the brutality of war; Frankie Sionil Jose's 'Rosales Saga' about a family's struggles and triumphs during the Spanish and American periods; Linda Ty Casper's *The Peninsulars* and *The Three Cornered Sun* exploring how individuals have roles to play in a nation's liberation; Ninotchka Rosca's *State of War* depicting the sufferings and survival of individuals caught up during the Martial Law years; and, Antonio Reyes Enriquez's novel, *Subanons* dramatizing the plight of a marginalized tribe, and, its struggles to keep its dignity — few examples of who we are as a people and who we are as human beings living in a constantly changing world.

I must congratulate the Capitol University, its president, Atty. Casimiro B. Juarez and his wife, the Executive Vice President, Dr. Fe Rosales Juarez; the Capitol University's Research & Extension Office under the leadership of an indefatigable figure in Dr. Marites A. Khanser, who has apparently inherited the literary genes of her forebears, the Arejolas of Bicol, and, whose faith in the making of literature gave the necessary push to realize this writing workshop as proposed by my graduate student at MSU-IIT, Cecile W. Bicbic.

Why I am emphasizing the persons behind the realization of Capitol University's first writing workshop is because it is one thing to get funding for a workshop, more importantly, it is to have the people who have the courage and persistence to conduct it.

The Popularity of Writers workshops

Why are writing workshops becoming popular in our country? What is their value?

In the United States, in Europe, and, elsewhere in the world, workshops have become popular for many reasons.

The Pulitzer Prize, PEN/Faulkner and PEN/Malamud winner and Princeton *University professor*, the writer Joyce Carol Oates, in an article in *The Writer Magazine* titled, "The Practice of Writing: The Writing Workshop" (1997) said, "there is no atmosphere quite so intense, so exciting and occasionally dramatic as a writing workshop when

discussion is sharp and imaginative, and when the work being critiqued is of a sufficient quality.”

The Country's workshops and the pioneers, Edilberto and Edith Tiempo

In our country, Edilberto and Edith Tiempo pioneered the conduct of writers workshops that has attracted about 16,000 of the country's writers to date.

In 1967, they founded the Silliman Summer Writers Workshop after their return from post-graduate studies in the United States. Politics reared its ugly head and the Silliman Summer Writers Workshop was later renamed, the National Summer Writers Workshop in Dumaguete conducted by a few of its alumni but based in Manila. Today, I am happy to report that Silliman University has reclaimed its writers workshop with the Department of English running it starting last summer.

In 1971, the University of the Philippines in Diliman opened its National Summer Writers Workshop and in 1994, the Iligan National Writers Workshop based in the MSU-IIT was organized. This was followed by the workshops of University of Santo Tomas, the Ateneo de Manila University and the De La Salle University.

Earlier, in 1984, the University of San Carlos hosted the first Cornelio T. Faigao Writers Workshop and the Women in Literary Arts in Cebu, among the local writers workshops, led the training in the Visayas and Mindanao. Many of these regional workshops based in UP Iloilo, UP Tacloban, Ateneo de Davao University and the Ateneo de Zamboanga University are managed by alumni of the Silliman writers workshop. As tributaries, these regional workshops have continuously enriched the river of creative writing in the country. And in these regional workshops, aspiring writers had their first baptisms of fire.

The Practice of Workshops

Writing workshops give opportunities for writers to have a hearing, otherwise, and, most often in life, their works are only read by faceless, anonymous readers. The writer in a writers workshop hears commentaries and often, he is asked to read or give a “voice” to the text, an invaluable experience (Oates, 1997).

One myth about workshops is that it teaches the participant how to write. This is not true. Writing workshops focus on works-in-progress and, according to Oates (1997), workshops cannot "imbue participants with talent, but they are invaluable for developing and honing what talent already exists," for "writing, like life is not only an art, but a craft."

Participants in workshops should read, prepare notes and offer thoughtful criticism on the works-in-progress submitted to the workshop. In this case, workshop participants are trained to be editors as well and "they must look at themselves as friends of fellow writers who offer constructive criticism not to hurt or wound or demoralize because all workshop participants are kindred spirits who can understand the ideals and frustrations of a writer as no one else can" (Oates, 1997).

Creative Writing

In workshops, we emphasize "creative" writing. Creative simply means, original, imaginative writing compared to functional, nonfiction writing. In fact, Oates said, all good writing even reportorial and technical can be "creative."

Writers are born with a love for language, for communicating, for telling. The forms of telling are many but the impulse is a simple one: the desire to bring into the world something that did not previously exist, stamped with the individual's perspective and personal style. On top of this, the creation of original work requires concentration and it can be exhausting because there are no short cuts to writing well.

John Steinbeck of "Grapes of Wrath" fame thinks that if there may be magic in story writing, no one has ever been able to reduce it to a recipe that can be passed from one person to another. The formula, if there be one, seems, to Steinbeck, to "lie solely in the aching urge of the writer to convey something he feels important to the reader. If the writer has that urge, he may sometimes but by no means always find the way to do it" (Mirrieles, 1998).

In other words, in the desolate, solitary path to writing, there are no rules. "The writer writes a story to a reader and the power of its offering was the measure of its excellence" (Mirrieles, 1998).

The Challenges in Historical Fiction

Capitol University has accepted the challenge to help train would-be writers to write historical fiction. Sir Walter Scott is the father of historical fiction because he popularized this genre of writing by his imaginative recreation of a remote past or about 100 years before his time the rationale being that "the nature of a historical period... can be best understood only in long retrospect, and it is then that the novelist can provide its best summation" (An Lim, 1999).

Scott was guided by this time frame and from him we get a good glimpse of Scottish history taken from historical records, individual accounts, old ballads and from folklore. Generations have enjoyed 'Ivanhoe' (1820), 'The Heart of Midlothian' (1818), 'Waverly' (1814) and many more. Experts, therefore believe, the best vehicle for historical fiction is the "novel" to recapture "zeitgeist" or the essence of a historical period, and in presenting a panorama of the past with amplitude and comprehensiveness" (An Lim, 1999).

Some of the historical novels in the world are Tolstoy's *War & Peace* (1865-1869); Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma* (1839); Alexander Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* (1844); Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895); Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* (1896); Leo Wallace's *Ben Hur* (1880); Graves' *I, Claudius* (1934); Uris' *Trinity* (1976); Allende's *House of Spirits* (1993), Gary Jennings' *Aztec* (1980), Don de Lillo's *Libra* (1988) and many more. They have enthralled us because writers have portrayed historical periods and historical figures as human to you and me.

The National Artist for Literature and Ramon Magsaysay Awardee for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communication Arts, Bienvenido Lumbera, lamented the paucity of Philippine historical novels. He says: "the historical novel is a genre that Filipino writers in English seem hesitant to touch."

The writer Jaime An Lim offers some reasons why many Filipino writers seem to shy away from the historical novel. Writing is already difficult as it is and if one has to grapple with two opposing elements, the factual and the fictive, it comes to no surprise why many do not easily attempt to write a historical novel because one needs to strike the right balance between history and fiction.

There must be a perfect assimilation of the historical and the imaginative so that one acting on and interacting with each other, give it a larger significance. Other reasons are what An Lim calls (1) 'genetic engineering' because the writer must have the temperament and

inclination to write a historical novel; and, (2) the ability to research archival materials in our libraries and museums, if, (3) these materials are available at all in the first place (An Lim, 1999).

About 40 years after Bien Lumbera expressed that lack of historical novels in our country, there are now a growing number of Filipino writers writing historical fiction. Aside from the pioneers of historical fiction in our country like Edilberto K. Tiempo, Wilfrido Nolledo, Antonio Enriquez, Frankie Sionil Jose, Linda Ty Casper, Alfredo Navarro Salanga, and Alfred Yuson, a few names come to mind: Charlson Ong, Katrina Tuvera, Jose Dalisay, Azucena Grajo Uranza, Erwin Castillo, Rosario Cruz Lucero, Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, Karl Gaspar, Carlos Cortes, and Renato Madrid.

Another myth that needs to be shattered is the idea that only historical novels deal with history. It is a mistaken one because even novels that address contemporary realities such as Rosca's *State of War*, Ong's *Embarrassment of Riches*, Tuvera's *The Jupiter Effect* or Enriquez's *Subanons* show historical dimensions which, "with change and the passage of time, becomes the surviving reflection of a vanished era" (Ty Casper in An Lim, 1999).

The Writer's Sense of Past

Nothing seems easy in the writing of fiction and it is the choice of the genre, in this case, for Capitol University, the writing of historical fiction that matters in this workshop. It is a wise choice because using data from history and folklore is a way of accessing the past as a way of understanding our present.

As the teacher Zacarias Clemente in Ty Casper's "The Three-Cornered Sun" says: "History as it recedes becomes confused. By raising the past to the level of imagination – by the leap that comes from knowledge itself and the respect for truth that is all that matters in life – a novel can preserve the essence of that past and give us a sense, a vision, of what we are."

I would like to urge Capitol University to uphold the aims of this workshop and continue this training especially for the future writers of Mindanao.

I have, time and again, trained my anger and frustration at the lack of attention we down here are getting from Manila. But, on second thought, the responsibility lies in us, i.e., to write and promote what we have, what we own.

In this competitive world, we cannot forever wait for the bread crumbs from the imperial capital's table to make us work. We have to empower ourselves to contribute to the Philippine literary canon so that when the chips fall where they may, we cannot be accused of being passive, of being fatalists and mere followers because we are at par with the best in the country.

Let this writing workshop be our commitment to the country's literature. Let us become leaders of our own destiny for a more comprehensive view of Philippine literature through the fidelity of our vision in creating the conditions to examine our realities for the human truth, both local and universal.

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