



The very first story I ever read by a Filipino writer was Nick Joaquin's *May Day Eve* — and I fell hard. The paragraph-long opening sentence, the “unbearable childhood fragrances of ripe guavas,” the sadness of a love that died, made me wonder that a writer could so create a world as to transport someone in the 20th century into the 19th. Today, 38 years and decades of teaching later, I still teach it, finding something new each time, from the layout of Intramuros to the images of love's sorcery: “the trap of a May night . . . the snare of summer . . . the terrible silver nets of the moon.”

Just when I met Nick Joaquin I do not remember, because the awed moment has been eclipsed by other meetings. I have been with him, for example — he in center, I on the periphery — at one summer's U. P. Creative Writing Center Workshop. He came for the sessions on the short story. The practice then was to circulate the unsigned pieces for discussion — first by the writing fellows, then by the faculty, and only then would the writer be identified. Nick commented on a story — jokingly but pointedly. The author acknowledged her work, thanked everyone for criticism and burst into tears. Nick, horrified and contrite, exclaimed that he'd never wanted to cause tears — and did not return to the Workshop for many summers.

For Nick is deeply kind, with a very tender core, which he covers up with bluster and jokes. He cannot refuse friends and even less-than-friends, who ask for an introduction, a foreword to a book, or the editing of their work. Yet: “Darling!” he greeted me once. “I read your piece, good!” And just as I was about to faint with pride, he added: “And I didn't agree with it at all.” I loved that — being read by NJ, appreciated and told the truth. That's when I thought: Hey, maybe we're friends, not just idol and fan.

Behn Cervantes kids Nick sometimes, when he's teasing, or singing, or loud: “Nick, *wala kang* volume control!” A Japanese scholar,

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however, who had translated his work, was amazingly sensitive and saw through the sound effects. Nick Joaquin, he wrote, drank and talked “at high volume” — to cover up a deep shyness. He had seen through the bluster with which the public figure envelopes the private man, whom very few really know.

Among those who know that man are Serafin and Gloria Lanot — and their children, in-laws, grandchildren, nephews and nieces. Serafin, the writer and astrologer, recounts how they met. He was poetry editor of the *Sunday Tribune* magazine, and a poem came in. “This is good,” he said. “Who’s he? The name sounds like a pseudonym — Nick Joaquin.” He published the poem and called the author to collect his check — all of five pesos. “From then on . . . we became friends.”

At any party now at the Lanots’ — children’s or adult’s birthday, graduation or no-occasion — a sure guest is Nick, usually bearing a *lechon*. He drinks with the guys, chats with Serafin, or with Mara and Pete Lacaba. He praises Gloria’s cooking, and presses the *dinuguan*, the *paella* on those of us who, new to the milieu, are a bit shy. He gathers the children and teases them — and gives them money or gifts personally chosen.

Then, when I am just on the point of offering to drive him home (we live in the same general area), Nick disappears — having gone home or elsewhere in the taxi he had waiting for him, or which he (secretly) called. Because he hates to impose. His fame and reputation make people offer him rides, meals, gifts, even clothes, and he rarely accepts, not wanting to impose, seemingly unconscious of his power or stature, and definite in his determination to shy away from what might be adulation from others or imposition from himself.

He will accept, however, an invitation to watch old Fred Astaire movies on videotape. “Isn’t Ginger great?” he exclaims. “No one like her for Fred!” But he will bring a bottle of brandy, or *chicharron*, although we’d love to supply the brandy or whatever else, for the fun of watching movies with Nick. He knows all the stories, and will tease Marra or Elena Roco by announcing what will happen next, or delivering the dialogue verbatim, as they plead: “Don’t tell us! We want to see for ourselves!”

He also knows all the songs, every line; and all the music and dances, every thrilling twist and turn. He sagely compares one film to another,

and informs us of their chronology. He also knows all Cole Porter lyrics, and I suspect also all Gershwin and Hammerstein as well. Not many realize that he is a walking documentary of the American years and their popular culture — the songs, the dances, the cinematic images. Although he certainly knows the Spanish era as if he'd been there, he knows as well the American times when the Filipino, as he puts it, turned from Hispanista to Sajonista.

Nick is also in the living memory of the writers of the 30s onward. When Eddy Alegre and I were interviewing the second generation of Filipino writers in English for *Writers and Their Milieu*, there was constant mention of Nick Joaquin, even if most of them were U.P. alumni, and he and Narciso Reyes were only the Thomasians. Franz Arellana remembers with some pride that Nick liked a poem of his called "Not House Enough," about two lovers on a cold bench in Mehan Garden wishing for a place in which to make love.

Carlos Angeles, then a poet acting as journalist to support his family, who looked up to Nick "as something like a model writer," feels good when Nick, then with the *Free Press*, told him: "You know what? We two should congratulate ourselves, because we do something which is not in our line, and yet we succeed."

When the time came to interview Nick himself, one of the stars of that generation, my heart was in my mouth, because I knew he does not particularly like interviews. (I don't blame him, having seen a published interview in which a student asked him: "Mr. Joaquin, what have you written?") He interviews — wonderfully, miraculously — but does not want to be on the receiving end of the questions. He did refuse, but generously countered: "But I will write your foreword."

He did, and with such insight. He answered questions we would not even have thought to ask. "When I started writing in the late 1930s," he began, "I was aware enough of my milieu to know that it was missing from our writing in English. The Manila I had been born into and had grown up in had yet to appear in our English fiction, although that fiction was mostly being written in Manila and about Manila. The place names were familiar enough, but they conjured up no city to trigger a shock of recognition in a Manileño like me. It seemed as if the city itself, the Manila I knew, had been invisible to our writer's in English. Something in their upbringing, in their schooling, had made them unable to see what had been so apparent to their

grandfathers. These young writers could only see what the American language saw."

No one had seen that before him — that the fiction he and his contemporaries wrote "saw" the subject matter in English, and was thus "a fiction without perspective." The "wish to fill up this lack" got him started, and he magically packed all that milieu into his writing. He ends: "I tell my readers that the best compliment they can pay me is to say that they smell *adobo* and *lechon* when they read me. I was smelling *adobo* and *lechon* when I wrote me." We all smell the *adobo* and *lechon* — and the incense of La Naval, the steamy heat of *tatarin*, the fear of *Candido* — when we read him.

We also taste the *pan de sal*, and the *churros* and *chocolate*, because Nick is the one of the best food writers I have read (search through *Almanac for Manileños* for all the tidbits) and heard. He is curious about new offerings in restaurants (where he then takes Gloria and Elena), and knowledgeable about the taste-to-be-desired for *callos* and *paella*. Once in his house, he discoursed with authority on the *queso de bola* and *jamon* we were having, and how and why they go with beer and with Christmas. Yes, he eats, and does not live on beer as the legend says (he never drinks alone), even though the bottle-in-hand is part of the public image.

One role I have accidentally played for Nick is that go-between with his publisher. When the Ateneo de Manila University Press was publishing his *Collected Poems*, he asked that they not be given his telephone number, and that all messages be relayed through me. Shy author though he was, however, he was completely professional — returning messages, meeting deadlines, even agreeing to do a reading during the launching. He writes on a schedule and always meets deadlines — for books, for newspaper columns — even delivering these personally, when necessary.

When Bookmark did the public the great favor of republishing Nick's long-out-of-print *Prose and Poems* and *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, they were allowed his phone number, which they used reverently and very seldom. They were amazed to find that Nick would proofread (and edit) the originals, and then the proofs — thoroughly and expertly, not delegating this to anyone. He is a demon proofreader, sharp-eyed and strict — because, he points out, that was his first job in the newspapers.

I have had the singular privilege of observing Nick the writer at somewhat close range, having once, unbelievably, edited a book he wrote. When I was invited to edit Jimmy Ongpin's biography (*Jaime Ongpin the Enigma: A Profile of the Filipino as Manager*), I immediately agreed, for love of Jimmy and Maribel and the children — but also for the thrill of working on Nick Joaquin's prose. But I said: "Me edit Nick Joaquin? No need! Let me just check that the nicknames are the same throughout, and that there are no typos."

So I did that, and very tentatively asked if it was okay to italicize the Spanish words. No said Nick, italics were for emphasis and titles. But he gave me permission to make his breezy prose "less naughty" when Maribel wished; and to add necessary bits — especially toward the end of the process, when he was already busy on another book. I wrote a phrase here, a sentence there, "a la Nick Joaquin," secure that he would check it anyway. It was a learning experience — seeing how he shaped a phrase, placed a word to give it emphasis, made an inversion for good reason.

Nick is a compleat professional, trusting his editor, listening beyond the words of his interview subjects. He typed the MS himself, and put in written revisions — then proofread every word. And such was the power of this biography of a man he'd never met that, after reading it letter by letter at least eight times, I was in tears every time I got to the end.

When I was asked to write the bookjacket blurb "About the Author," I panicked — what else was there to say about the National Artist? So I did the obvious, pointing out that one of the country's foremost writers had written novels (*The Woman Who Had Two Navels; Cave and Shadows*), volumes of poetry and short fiction (*Collected Verse; Prose and Poems; Tropical Gothic*); plays (*Portrait of the Artist as Filipino; Tropical Baroque*); journalistic essays (*Doveglion and Other Cameos, etc.*); social and cultural history (*A Question of Heroes; Culture and History*); biography (*The Aquinos of Tarlac; The World of Rafael Salas*); translations from the Spanish (*The Complete Poems and Plays of Jose Rizal*); and stories for children (*Pop Stories for Groovy Kids*). "No one else has written so much, so variedly, and so well about so many aspects of the Filipino."

When someone asks me, therefore: "Do you know Nick Joaquin?" In my mind, I say: Which Nick? The poet, the fictionist, the journalist, the biographer? The movie buff, the nostalgia king, the pop culture honcho? The Hispanista, the Sajonista? The *lechon*-bearer, the food connoisseur? The compleat professional? The public figure, the private man? I do not claim to know all of them. But, proudly, *kilala ko siya*, and know that he's completing another year soon after May Day Eve. Happy Birthday, Nick. 