

LITERARY SECTION: FICTION

INTERVIEW WITH JOSE Y. DALISAY

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Introduction

Dr. Jose Y. Dalisay Jr., or Butch Dalisay as he is known among his colleagues and his students, is the author of the first novel by a Filipino (*Soledad's Sister*) to be short-listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize. Early this year, Dalisay was one of eight internationally acclaimed authors at the main event of the Fifth Annual PEN World Voices Festival. With him on this event were major international writers such as Salman Rushdie (India/USA), Raja Shehadeh (Palestine), Muriel Barbery (France), Narcís Comadira (Spain), Edwidge Danticat (Haiti), Péter Nádas (Hungary), and Sergio Ramírez (Nicaragua).

Dalisay writes in both English and Filipino. Prior to *Soledad's Sister*, he had previously published a novel, and fifteen other books of short fiction, plays, and essays. Five of these have received the National Book Award from the Manila Critics Circle, and several have been awarded the prestigious Don Carlos Palanca Award for Literature. He has received several international writing grants, and has been invited to deliver papers and handle lectures in the US, the UK, and Australia. He continues to teach English and Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, currently heading the UP Institute of Creative Writing.

Here, Daryll Delgado converses with Jose "Butch" Dalisay about the narrative design in his fiction, and zeroes in on the particularities of voice, the limits of conventional novelistic discourse, and the implications on and issues of identity that the author explores in the novel *Soledad's Sister*.

Daryll Delgado (DD): Do you use yourself as a central character to meditate on certain questions, certain issues, such as those that you explore in your novel, Soledad's Sister?

I suppose that is inevitable with authors. But I try not to. I try to see things from the POV of my characters. But in this novel, since it is told in the third person omniscient, I suppose this is where my own views on things come into play. For instance, in the way I describe and narrate the things that happen at the airport, in the city ... It can't be helped that my own sense of things comes into the picture.

I suppose there is value in that. I think it is really impossible, especially in a novel, to even try to be too objective in a journalistic sort of way.

DD: Yes, I guess it is rather impossible to detach yourself completely from how you do view or how you have been used to viewing things ...

Right. The very fact that you focus on some things rather than on others already conveys a certain attitude. I would think that my general attitude towards life here and towards my fellow Filipinos is largely sympathetic or, at least, that is what I always try to convey. Yet, there has to be a certain amount of indifference, in order to write about it. By that, I mean, realize that bad things happen to us, and bad things happen to my characters who also do bad and stupid things, and I do not mean to romanticize them or what they do in any way.

DD: I thought that the voice that you chose to narrate the story in the novel did sound a bit detached and, at certain parts, almost indifferent ... How do you reconcile this with your intent, which is to convey sympathy?

I think the sympathy is less in the description than in the depiction of what happens to them, what they do ... Sure, we make mistakes, but our motivations our impulses are to do good, to do right, to improve our lives. Of course, things get in the way but, apart from that, I still believe that, to some extent, we do have free will.

I do not want to go out of my way as an author to tilt things in a certain direction. That's why I try to avoid romanticizing poverty, *kamalian*, *kamalasan* (mistakes, misfortunes). Because people do try to do their best to survive, to do well.

DD: And this was clear to you, from the very first day you decided to write this novel, that this should be the tone, the voice that should come out?

No. I never really know until I'm in the writing itself.

I suppose I always bring to the writing a certain sensibility. When I write, most of the time, I am not angry, I do not have a visible agenda, I just want to render the scenes and the characters as sharply as I can, and go on from there.

I did not know I was going to write this way about these people. I did know that I was going to write a novel, a dark comedy. That was very clear to me. I told myself, we've written so much about ourselves, but they were always sad, depressing. Of course, this one is also depressing. But there is, I think, irony there, and humor. Maybe they're difficult

to see ... But I wanted to do something comic, even if in a very dark way. That was my intention. I'm not sure if I achieved that.

I wrote this over several years ago. One of the reasons I kept stopping was that it kept getting darker and darker, the sense of the comic was lost. That was the spirit which the book originally had; that is why it opens with the scene where confusion ensues over the corpses ... I don't know if it's inevitable, that it always eventually ends in melancholy.

DD: As you would always say in class, Sir, it is more difficult to write something funny, never mind that we are a very funny lot ...

Always more difficult to write something humorous, or comic. A very strange thing, since we are a very funny people, we love jokes, we laugh all the time. But when it comes to the writing of novels, there's always the shadow of Rizal. Every novel always has to be the next *Noli* ... We need to be liberated from this shadow, somehow. Definitely, every Filipino novelist, unless they're very young, those no longer in touch with Rizal, no longer indebted, everyone will feel that influence, that pressure bearing down on you, which is at once exhilarating and terrifying to feel... That people will measure you in terms of what Rizal has accomplished, in terms of his novels.

DD: How long did it take you to put this whole thing together? What made you think of venturing into the writing of this particular novel?

I started writing this in 1999. This was the idea I brought with me to my David Wong fellowship. (Please see: <http://www.uea.ac.uk/lit/awards/wong>).

It started with a news report headline about 600 OFWs arriving in NAIA, coming home in coffins every year ... Almost two a day! That's crazy. It's crazy that we don't notice it anymore. It's the same old story, keeps repeating itself.

The cost of sending all these people out ... I toyed with the idea, and it became a story about a woman in the box, and a "what if" ... What if *magkapalitan ang katawan*...? That's where it started. I suppose the David Wong people found it startling enough.

DD: How long did you stay in Europe for this grant?

I was there for nine months. There was not much pressure. We could do what we wanted to do. And I did: travel around Europe, and sleep, and enjoy the beauty of the

place. I did write about 200 pages but, eventually, I wasn't even able to use many of those pages, when I resumed writing the novel again, because it took a different shape. So, I told myself, I'll just use these for some other project, some other thing.

DD: How long did it take you to write? When did you finally decide to wrap it all up?

Off and on through the years, I would look at it, write a few paragraphs, I didn't really pick up on it, until I heard from Charlson Ong, who was my roommate during the UP workshop in Baguio, the year you guys were there as fellows, at the Igorot Lodge. Charlson was working on a manuscript and it was he who told me about the Man Asian prize. Only ten thousand words were initially required, and submissions would be done by email.

DD: You mean, before this, you had not been doing any work on it?

No, not at all. Between 1999 and 2007, I must have published at least 10 or 15 books, but none of them was the novel ... And again after submitting to Man Asian, I forgot about it. For a few months. Until I received news that I was long-listed. I was happy enough then, I wasn't seriously thinking of finishing it until, again, I received another message.

DD: Even when your manuscript made it to the long list, you still did not feel the drive to finish it?

No, not really. I thought, what are the chances? Long list, from 243 entries, 23 are listed. I was the only Filipino on the long list. And then, a couple of months later, I received a phone call. I almost did not take that call. I was informed that I was on the shortlist but, to be qualified, I needed to submit the full novel in two weeks. That's why I abandoned it for a while. No way could I finish the novel in two weeks. After about the third day, I started thinking about my friends who did not make it to the list, and felt ashamed ... I decided to work on it for a week, gave my classes a week off. I played one last round of poker before I locked myself in the house.

DD: Was it very difficult to finally sit down to it and work on it again?

Surprisingly, once I knew what I wanted to do, it wasn't so difficult.

DD: So, what was it, and when did you know what you wanted to do, exactly?

I took another long look at what I had. Practical considerations came in. Once I knew that I had a week to do it, I had to think of what I could do given a week. I had to abandon certain scenes. Originally, I had a spectacular ending! There was supposed to be a funeral procession, across a bridge that would collapse, and the coffin would topple back into the water.

DD: That sounds like a very cinematic ending ...

Very cinematic, indeed. But since I had real constraints, I had to reconsider the story arc. I decided to structure the narrative around three days of real time. What I wanted to do, what I really was going after was, to bring the body back to the water, and that's where the story ends.

The manuscript I finally submitted to the Man Asia was much shorter than the novel that you read. It did not contain the back stories that take place in Hong Kong and Jeddah. It was very bare. There was just a straight narrative – a coffin was stolen, and it fell into the water. It was only later, after the awards, after I found an agent, a very good one... and she also happened to be a very good editor. She got back to me and we discussed how to go about the book again, and I realized that, yes, I had to write out those scenes, what happens to the character in Hong Kong and Jeddah.

DD: How long did it take you to put those crucial scenes together?

For those additional scenes, maybe another month. In a somewhat more relaxed pace, and also more fun. Since there were no longer any constraints, since the structure was already there, I guess it was more like a matter of filling in the blanks and expanding certain scenes.

DD: Were there any other conditions, for the prize, from the awards-giving body?

No other conditions. The objective of the prize is to get new Asian books out in the market. It is really for that... that's why they wanted to seek unpublished novels in English. So publishers will take interest.

DD: This agent whom you met in HK, what were her own interests, which direction did she want the novel to take? Whom did she represent?

A couple of agents contacted me, but she was the one I hooked up with. She represented an Indian company, a big conglomerate – industry, entertainment, literary agency. The sad part is they decided, eventually, to dissolve the agency, but my agent brought the book with her to the new company. Meanwhile arrangements were being done with Anvil here.

Contract with agent is for publishing and distribution worldwide, except for the Philippines. These are just global terms, for a relatively small market. The final copy that is circulating out there, picked up by an Italian publisher, is slightly longer.

DD: What parts did you have to add?

After the body is lost, what happened to the body, I added a scene, upon the agent's suggestion. A couple of scenes ... the police hoist up two bodies now. Rory is asked to identify and she screams "That is not my sister!" But nobody believes her because everyone thinks she is denial. Then I just explain a bit more.

Foreign readers found it hard to believe, for example, why Rory would insist on leaving even after what had happened. To Filipinos it's not a mystery ... we do not let those things bother us. Well, they bother us, but they do not stop us.

DD: I find it amazing that you started this novel about ten years ago, but the issues are still very much relevant, maybe even more so, they still resonate ... Also kind of sad, that the issues are still there, that they've even become more complicated.

It's true, the situation hasn't changed, only worsened. Writing the novel over such a long time, the aging shows. When I started this, the cell phone was a new thing. In the novel only the Vice Mayor had a phone.

DD: So, you didn't want to change those parts, the ones hinged on that particular time ... to update the descriptions of the setting?

I would have wanted to ... But I decided to keep it set in the '90s, but I think that nuance would be lost on a lot of people.

DD: Minor detail, but the cell phone does seem to be integral to the character, to the setting, even if this element effectively dates the book ...

Yes, they are significant to the character. The fact that this is published in 2008, however, obscures that. Most readers won't care about that. But if they do cue in on this, it can also create for them a better sense of the time.

I don't mind those little details, except that in this case, they create some kind of a problem. But yes, those details can get really distracting. If I am going to write about the here and now, however, I am going to look for those things, include them in the writing to effectively date the setting. So it's a judgment call.

DD: I agree, and the thing is, in this novel, the vital issues, the vital elements of the narrative did not really have to be changed, and are, after all, still relevant, even more poignant now. And to nitpick on little elements like the gadgets used by the character seems a little funny in this light ... But, just to go back to the setting, where is Paez?

I made it up. Where do you think is it?

DD: South of Manila? Not so close. Not so far. What I retain of the setting is the sense of space between houses, and the idea that some parts of the place are still dark, or in the dark, and then somewhere in the middle of it all is an oasis, a videoke bar, of course!

Right, of course! I think it's in Quezon Province.

DD: And the newly developed subdivisions. For me, this was the test that it was written for Filipinos. Not that it has to be tested, or that all books coming out of the Philippines have to be tested in any way. I just find this to be a significant feature of the novel. That it does not have to explain where the setting is, why it is there, what is going on ... If you're a Filipino reader, you just know where it is and why this kind of story unfolds there.

Right. I just wanted water in the area. I needed it to be a certain driving distance, about five to six hours. So I suppose that settled it for me. I don't even know why I put the story there. I don't have any connections to that part of the country.

DD: Why did you choose to write the novel in the third person? It's interesting that it is in the third person, but his is a very subjective voice, the voice is a character in each scene, like a reporter who is always on the scene. I was wondering how you developed that kind of voice, and why.

Yes, it does sound like a canned voice. I am comfortable with that. Maybe also drawing on other things that I do as an essayist or columnist so that's where the voice comes out.

In my work, on fiction, since it is realist fiction that I do, I make a lot of descriptions. I do not mind creating long paragraphs of descriptions. I like doing that. And it can best be done with this choice of narrator.

DD: Is it important to you that the voice is not only clear, but functions like a character, that one can almost imagine what this voice looks like ...

Yes, I think it is important that the authorial voice be able to convey a certain attitude towards the materials, towards the characters, and I keep hoping that it is a voice that is gently critical, that doesn't condemn the characters ... but at the same time, one that understands.

DD: Does this voice then have to be representative of a particular sector that represents a particular attitude? If this voice has to be not only critical but also sympathetic, I would think that it would have to come from a more or less stable, position. Here, you write about a particular group of people, a particular milieu ... How do you also get out of that position, limiting as it is?

I suppose my perspective on this, is the perspective of someone from the middle class, an educated middle class, who did not have to go through these things; who thinks he understands how things happen, and why, without directly being involved. That's both a good and a bad thing. Because if such a novel were written from the POV of one of the characters the treatment would be very different.

One of the things I wanted to do from the very start of this novel ... one thing I told myself: I am going to write about people not like me. I am going to write about ordinary Filipinos leading ordinary lives. I did not want any academics, artists. No quotations from Nietzsche. That sort of thing.

I would like to think that in all my other stories this is how I am, that is how my characters are. I really do not like to write about writers, it gives authors an excuse to preach about aesthetics.

I also decided: no more of the semi-autobiographical. With my first novel, I've scratched that itch, gotten it out of the way. I realize that the test of one's skills as a storyteller comes after that first novel. After you've mined your own experience, now what else can you write about? So, I had really decided early on that I am going to write about different people.

Which is not to say that I do not know these people. Because, in a way, I do. My father was an ex policeman, before I was born. He was looking for a better job, he did not finish college. The very first picture in his album is that of him in a police uniform. I was also a police reporter for the Philippines Herald ... I know that world.

DD: And also its language...?

Yes. I was a constant figure in the police department. Every day somebody dies there. That is probably why, in this novel, many people die ... But, also Rory's world. I know that world, too.

I felt comfortable with these characters. I didn't think that you really need to go to college to find interesting people to write about.

DD: Who or what were you reading at that time, when you were working on the novel?

I do not really remember. I think I was reading a lot of non-fiction. Essays by Julian Barnes. Reflective non-fiction pieces. I'm engaged more by these. The problem sometimes with a fictionist reading fiction, I can't help looking at the artifice ... and it gets in the way. Sometimes, it can still get engaging but, really, I feel I am getting older and older. There is this rush in me, to know about other things ... history, travel, science, books about the discovery of mammoths in the arctic.

Although, I still want to just pick up a novel and be swept away by it. That hasn't happened recently.

DD: In your own novels, stories, do you design the narrative structure, do you try to achieve a particular effect from the outset?

Yes, in fact for this novel, I told myself three days, that's the design. I had to work with three days of real time. I like to give myself technical problems. Like, I will say, O.K., this story will contain this element, or this word, or this story will not contain semi colons. I need to do this to keep myself interested. Every story to me is a game, a technical challenge. So, here, I tell myself, you have three days to work on. And there will be some kind of narrative arc.

This is all made up, of course. But I had a design in mind, although I'm not used to conceiving of novels. While I was going through the novel, as a short story writer, I always felt that I have said enough. But, novel readers want more ... One of the comments on *Soledad's Sister* is that it's not really a novel, it's a long, long short story. That's valid. It doesn't have peaks and valleys one expects from a novel. And I really am much more comfortable with that. After writing this, in fact, I don't even know if I really want to write a real novel.

DD: That's why I was interested to know how you discarded those conventions. Now that you said that you imposed on yourself three days of real time, I think it explains a lot, and it worked really well for this novel. The short narrative line allows for the simultaneity and parallels to take place, the many things happening in different worlds ... which is what makes this novel the novel that it is, and a discourse that I find beautiful.

Those just came out as a result of the description, I guess. The concept, I think, is alien to me. *Yung mga chapter, chapter...* [laughter]. I also told myself to stick to three days as a sort of a reaction to our propensity to write novels on such grand scales, spanning generations, centuries, *a la* Jose Arcadio Buendia ...

I am not against that. Something there resonates with us, obviously ... But it's that grand, epic scale that I want to veer away from. I want to write a quiet novel which takes place within a short period.

DD: I think that narrative strategy here is perfect. It effectively diffuses the single, heavy effect of the death, and the coming home. It opened up the narrative to so many possible things, many possible voices, for a particular novelistic discourse ...

Another one of those things I wanted to do, create many characters, each one important, necessary, with his or her own story. I had fun there. I ended with a new

character who was completely removed from everything else. I felt that, I wanted to end it with this; suspended ...

DD: And the title, how the characters and their names are hinged on each other, their implications ... Rory, Soledad's Sister, also sort of vanishes, her identity is gone, erased. The implications are endless, terrifying.

Yes. You're not really sure until the end who had died. You're not really sure where Soledad is, what happened to her ... I actually just thought of these toward the end. I had to do a lot of reading for this. News accounts ... A lot of foreign girls do vanish into these districts ... But, I also wanted to bring out the point that, when Rory says it is not my sister, maybe it is not. But, does it matter all that much if we know? Is Soledad better or worse off if she had just vanished into the prostitution district? Is that another kind of death? And does it matter?

In the end, [this is what happens], she is just another statistic, another curiosity except to the people close to her. And there's not many of them. She might as well have completely vanished.