

A Loaded Gun in the House Next Door

More than anything, my daily commute is an exercise in fortitude: Lately I have had to grip a steel pole with one hand, and a book with the other, for at least an hour, straining to hold myself aright as I sway with every snort and lurch of the train. But those are my lucky days, for more often than not there's nothing to hold for support—surely not the battered gray handle, sliding against the dull metal bar, ever slipping, leaving me marooned in a sea of bodies crammed together like fillings in a soggy sandwich. Sometimes it is enough to think that each ride were my purgatory on earth, equivalent to a day in a lake of fire and molten shackles; or that most days I can get through, to my station at last, in the company of a good book.

There's something to be said about how we buffer the solitude that attends the constrained routine of our lives. Some tap away at their cellphone screens with glazed eyes, perhaps absorbed in some frenzied game or conversation with other people from miles away. Others plug earphones into their ears, a defense against the resonant silence among indifferent passengers who are, ironically enough, bumping and rubbing against each other, sharing sweat and breathing the same dank air. They hum along with tunes blaring from their handy widget, alone in their worries and thoughts and silences. A couple of times I will peer over a shoulder of someone reading a tabloid, but no sooner does she pick it up than she folds it crosswise and fans herself with it. Worse, I see most of these newspapers tossed away and stamped with blotches of mud, if not torn to shreds by shoes that are perpetually in a hurry to get the day over with. For indeed why bother reading about politicians slinging mud at each other, or the plight of farmers and migrant workers and the working class, or people maimed to death and lives ravaged by war and disasters—when far more pleasant diversions are just a click away, when you're fed up enough as it is with your own problems to even mind our nation's? Ah, but I am no different: Always I pull a book out of my bag and lose myself in words, in my solitary quest for happiness, sinking deeper into my own silence.

These contradictions we live with daily remind me of the dismal society Ray Bradbury rendered in *Fahrenheit 451*: men with thimble-like radios crammed in their ears, flat-faced television with four-wall screens blaring out backslapping, raucous shows that drown out the throes of a nation in the grip of a war. Where no opinions, no philosophies, no reflections dawn, everyone sits comfortably in their own parlors as cities are bombed out, and a nuclear holocaust rages madly on. It is easy to dismiss this as “a work of fiction,” to be sure, with this disclaimer all too conveniently and erroneously construed to mean “fanciful” or “far-fetched.” And yet doesn’t it, for all its “fictitiousness,” mirror our hard-wired default setting, which is apathy, every time we blot out what’s going on around us—the battles waged, the tyrannies holding sway, the sorry lives caught in the bewildering middle—and dwell solely on the unruffled featherbed of our subjectivities?

As Bradbury’s Guy Montag puts it, “We need not be let alone. We need to be really bothered once in a while. How long is it since you were *really* bothered? About something important, about something real?”

Literature is real, not because they tell us that in the near future we would be swarmed with mechanical hounds, say, or that aliens would swoop down on earth, but because they tell us there are evils lurking in wait to trample our freedom underfoot, unthinkable horrors that are possible once the fragile comfort of our lives is shattered by social inequity and oppression. Good literature, indeed, is the food of the critical mind which ever hungers for a less flawed world than what awaits outside the pages of a book, a more vibrant life than that which it awakens to. We close a book not without a pang of disappointment, for what we have just left is somehow so much better than the one we are to return to. With the dissatisfaction and disillusionment borne of consuming good literature, we are constantly reminded that however our world is badly made, it can be improved and made richer and more apprehensible, more like the fictional worlds we slide into and dream to inhabit. Sometimes we are shown the not-so-flattering human realities, the shuddery images of injustice in dystopian societies or the cutting ironies beneath the lacy trappings of utopian societies.

But here, too, lies the need to examine our world, in all its squalor and splendor, to develop a non-conformist attitude that is at the same time free of ideological blinders, to raise social consciousness, to question, to think, to move.

In consequence, we are sensitized to how our minds are kept from wandering free by obscurantism and the overwhelming tide of numbing information our generation is in a rush to catch up with, the same arcane codes and knowledge that widen the chasms between us and the next person. Perhaps much of this fragmentation has to do with the fallacious notion that, in this era when “Facebook” is opened more often than an actual book and “Google” is made a verb, good old books, like Betamax and cable televisions, have now gone out of fashion. But no, literature—thanks to reading—has been, and always will be, a shared human experience that transcends space and time, eclipses borders and erects bridges among men and women otherwise divided by religions, worldviews, languages, predispositions, excesses and stupidities. Like a helpless wisp carried this way or that upon some errant wind, the people of a nation without a literary tradition is bound to remain unmoored and adrift, ever in need of anchorage to steer itself in the right direction.

Ours is a literature that has served as a great spur, as attested to by history, in cultivating a fraternity among Filipinos that is a force to be reckoned with. It charts our own hybrid culture and historical experience as a people, for in its words lie lives lived and imagined upon our own ground. Though I have come upon Philippine literature rather only recently, I do think what I have read fueled what later became a more genuine love for things Filipino: for one, the *halo-halo* that is as much our nation’s favorite snack as an exemplification of the *mélange* of topics we grapple with and make sense of, of voices we assume to articulate a collective narrative and the silences of those muffled right in our midst. We are a brazen lot, really, and there is no better testament to this than our literature where abound no taboos, as we delve into gender and ethnicity, abortion and child abuse, incest and fornication, imperialism and globalization, and also of course the timeless themes of childhood and old age, death and rebirth, courage and perfidy, love and war.

“It’s amazing you still find time to read!” thundered a classmate once. But I have heard this a dozen of times, hemmed and hawed by friends who were, I guess, amused no end that an engineering student would engage in what they believed was a solipsistic, bourgeois activity. In this country where one’s work is quantified by the number of zeroes in one’s paycheck, where one would rather buy an iPhone than a couple of books, where bookshops double as merchandise stores—here, unless you’re a literature student or relatively privileged, the widely held conception goes, there’s no sense in curling up with a book and wielding your own pen. Poverty is the artists’ lot, we couldn’t be more reminded of this, as many are even derailed by parents who pride themselves on allowing their children to choose their own paths—sure, if it’s a choice between business or medicine, law or engineering. Art, they say, it is a waste of time. Like Belle in the film *Beauty and the Beast*, a reader is deemed strange, removed from reality, whose head’s up on some cloud.

The potential of literature for cultivating national unity languishes unrealized without an audience willing to read what is written, to digest what is read. Literature doesn’t exist in vacuum; it needs minds to plumb and prod, and a government that puts a high premium on culture and humanities just as it does on science and technology. What’s “literary” is shunned by ordinary readers, I think, because little effort is made to bolster the arts in general and communicate it to the public. Hence, today Nick Joaquin, Rio Alma, Kerima Polotan, and Gilda Cordero-Fernando, among others, never see the light of day outside a dusty classroom where no more than twenty sleepy-eyed students nod away to the words of a cranky, cobwebby professor. Watching plays, discoursing on books, going to exhibits or book launches, can be dispensed with without much scruple, sadly, because they’re seen not as much a part and parcel of an average Filipino’s life as, say, iPhones. Once I went to a bookstore and asked where their Filipiniana was, only to be directed to a niggardly shelf in which were cookbooks, children’s stories, and a handful of local publications, everything lumped together topsy-turvy, while a few feet off were shelves after shelves of shrink-wrapped foreign books, sorted, ready to be ladled out on a perfume-spritzed silver platter.

You would have thought that as a nation of storytellers, in these islands where flourish tales and lore that are warp and woof of our identity, literature would not be made into something like a mere pastime indulged in by only a few: the intelligentsia, the elite. For truly it does not fade out in light of the here and now, but instead keeps us in touch with our past, our roots and hopes, fostering a shared sense of nationhood. It speaks to us, speaks of us, speaks for us, and expects nothing less than for us to speak up, foremost as a people ready to insist on our freedom and the many possibilities of where else our story might go. Because words are ever at our disposal.

“A book is a loaded gun in the house next door,” writes Bradbury, and true enough the most cruel dictatorships in history have gone out of their way to keep so leery an eye on writers, to censor seditious works and repress radical thinking and open dissent, and this couldn’t be more accurate in a nation whose people, more than once, mounted a revolution incited by subversive words. True, the fires of unrest were stoked not by an unwieldy sword, and yet like some archaic relic displayed on a fancy shelf, our own literature is now thought of by many as dead if only because of the dearth of readership. With the right stewarding, I believe, this problem is still remediable. We have a treasure trove of literature, we have a ballooning population, and it wouldn’t take a genius to see just how a brotherly chain can be forged within, and despite, our very diversity. That we can be a nation of readers, of free individuals whose consciousness is shaped by literature, aware of our common origin and common goal, unsubmitive and critical, is not a pie in the sky.

It’s a scary world out there, we are told many times, and the streets I shuffle along every day sigh the bated breaths of shoes wary of each step. On the train eyes flit past me, elbows nudge me out of the way, shoulders shove me aside, and where can I begin to read when I barely have space for myself? But somehow, like how one pulls round a tough day, like how our carnivalesque country with its beleaguered lot picks itself up day after day, I get by. I read. In my bag I carry a loaded gun, and fairly soon, I want to believe, so will the next person, till at last we form a bellicose battalion, for the question of whether *it* is needed—here and elsewhere, that goes without saying.