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Signs of the Times

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Book Reviews

SIGNS OF THE TIMES. By Pacifico Aprieto. Manila: JMC Press Inc., 1984. 86 pages.

RECOLLECTIONS AND DIGRESSIONS. By Katoks Tayag. Manila: Philnabank Club, 1985. 229 pages.

Executive directors of government offices and professional writers both, Aprieto and Tayag share themselves in these two collections of informal essays that trace their roots to material originally written for their respective office newsletters.

Aprieto, executive director of the Textbook Board Secretariat and well-known fiction writer, explains that his essays were meant to be "little talks with my staff" through the office newsletter, until they were anthologized "under the innocuous title *From the Director's Desk*." *Signs of the Times* is an "enlarged edition" that has been updated with new articles and given a catchier title.

A collection of forty "little pieces" each composed of only a few paragraphs, the book ("Booklet" is probably a more apt description for the collection) can easily be read in one sitting. However, a slower pace would allow time to digest each bit and might be a more fruitful way of approaching this slim volume that lives up to its subtitle: *And Other Thoughts, Reminders and Miscellany*.

In many of the essays, Aprieto begins with a thought, observation or reminder which triggers still another, until the combination results in a fresh insight on the topic under discussion. Always, the language is simple and direct, without the usual pedantic pomposity associated with the bureaucracy.

"Signs of the Times," the piece from which the title is lifted, starts off in a humorous recitation of signs which abound in the city, accompanied by brief commentaries supplying their contexts. Before the reader is done, however, he realizes that beyond the entertainment value of the essay, Aprieto has succeeded in conveying a telling insight not only on the language confusion in the Philippines but on the Filipino psyche as well.

And so he goes on, in thirty-nine other essays that range from personalities to professions, from Manila to Vienna. Through it all, the reader interacts with the writer in an active, lively process through his pieces, for they invite personal reflection, or perhaps outward discussion with someone of similar or opposite views.

Renato ("Katoks") Tayag, recently deceased (August 1985), was a lawyer, a director of the Philippine National Bank, and a popular journalist when *Recollections and Digressions* was published. A collection of the author's informal essays, mostly published in *Philnabank News* since February 1977 when he first started to write for the newsletter, the book is divided into seven sections that broadly hint at the subject of each essay. Thus, the section entitled "Reminiscences" contains two essays on the author's life as writer, soldier, lawyer and journalist; "Under Two Helmsmen" has a series of essays written in 1964 on China in Mao's time, when he was among the first Philippine journalists to get a close-up look at the regime, and another on China revisited, in 1982; "Bataan in Retrospect" includes essays on the fall, the death march to Capas, life in a prison camp and a look back on what it all meant forty years later—essays written from 1945 to 1985. There are also reprints from his monthly column in *Manila Magazine*, "Book Talk," and a few speeches delivered to groups like the Rotary Club.

Longer than Aprieto's "little pieces," Tayag's informal essays have larger scope and allow the reader to get to know the man behind the pen more intimately. Each piece is a pleasure to read, written in a warm personal style that is both rich and witty.

For Kapampangans, the collection will be of particular interest for its pieces on the city of Angeles; "Base Town, Asia" and even more so, "The Vanishing Pampango Nation." The latter is a chronicle composed of fact, hearsay and opinion, which delightfully illustrates why, though the Pampangos "may completely disappear some day," they have secured a niche for themselves in Philippine history "for good or ill." Tayag also explains in this essay why, though the Tagalogs "have given the capital city their language," the Pampangos are the ones who provide the city its spice and color.

The essays have a casual charm, and reveal a man who has experienced much and lived fully, and who luckily decided to ignore a columnist who long ago made him feel presumptuous about committing his recollections and digressions to print. The book is rich in memories that make historical moments come alive, personal observations that allow the reader to experience vicariously what he has been through and meet the people he has known, and humor that lightens the heart and invites a smile. In it, the vanishing art of the personal essay is memorialized.

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