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## **Five Years in a Forgotten Land, by Hidalgo**

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in nearby Cavite, will be glad to discover what to them have been unknown treasures. One hopes that a major result of this book will be not only on the increase of knowledge and appreciation of the old churches, but a more diligent and enlightened effort to preserve them, and if financially and technically possible, to restore what has been ruined or lost.

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**Five Years In A Forgotten Land: A Burmese Notebook.** Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1991. ix, 122 pages.

Philip Lopate wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* (November 18, 1984) that "the informal or familiar essay is a wonderfully tolerant form, able to accommodate rumination, memoir, anecdote, diatribe, scholarship, fantasy and moral philosophy. It might have an elegant form or an amoebic shapelessness, held together by little more than the author's voice." Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo's collection of "travel notes" in this collection is a good example of the versatility of the essay form and the writer's voice, honed to perfection by intellectual insight, literary imagination and skill. She is a welcome addition to the pantheon of Philippine writers in English in a genre that is not too respected in literary circles, although it is certainly popular in the Philippines in its journalistic form—the newspaper column.

Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo has been writing for Philippine newspapers and magazines since the age of fifteen. In the mid-1970s she took leave from her teaching job at the University of the Philippines to join her husband, Antonio Hidalgo, who had accepted a job with the United Nations. Since then she has worked as a writer, editor and teacher in Thailand, Lebanon, Korea, Burma and New York. She previously published a collection of short stories—*Ballad of A Lost Season* (Manila, 1987). But her three collections of autobiographical-travel essays (*Sojourns*, Manila, 1984; *Korean Sketchbook*, Seoul, 1987; and this latest volume) have established her as a master of insight and language and a Philippine essayist of note. At present she is teaching Creative Writing and Literature at the University of the Philippines and working on her Ph.D.

Informal, familiar essays, like these in *Five Years In A Forgotten Land* tend to seize on the parade of everyday life, odd characters, small public rituals, vanities, fashions, bits of history and culture, folk tales and art works, love and disappointment, the pleasures of going shopping or eating out, being alone, reading, going to the movies, walking the streets, taking weekend vacation trips, exploring temples. All that is here in Pantoja-Hidalgo's col-

lection. Petronilo Bn. Daroy says that "Each essay in *Five Years In A Forgotten Land* has its own special interest and eloquence. When read together as a single report or narrative, the essays have a different impact—they reveal not only a keen observer capable of reconstructing the quaint and, at times, exotic but also a lively intelligence that is quick to note contradictions, the absurdities and the possible sources of the political upheavals that were to transpire in Burma" (p.viii). The quote is a good description of the author's contribution in these essays.

The first three essays in the volume are good examples of the quaint and the exotic. "The Junk Shops of Rangoon" is a masterpiece of the familiar essay. "Rangoon (now called Yangon) is a quiet little city, slow-paced, somnolent. . . . During the time that we lived there, from October 1984 to March 1989, opportunities for entertainment were not numerous. . . . Therefore, the thing to do on weekends was to visit the junk shops" (pp. 3-4). "On the Road" is a wonderfully told adventure story of a broken down car and an interrupted journey in a little village in Burma. But more than that, it is an insight into the mentality of the Burmese, and the alienation of Burmese officialdom from the ordinary people. "Sun and Sea" is an account of a vacation trip to Sandoway and the beach of Ngapali. Maurice Collis described the life in Sandoway in 1923: "There was nothing to do but bathe, walk along an incomparable strand, and sit in an armchair on the bungalow's veranda, dozing in the warm wind" (p. 20). Pantoja-Hidalgo describes the scene sixty-five years later. Not much has changed from Collis's description. But Pantoja-Hidalgo adds with a wry bit of irony: "The usual rules of Socialist Burma do not apply there" (p. 23).

My favorite essay in the collection is "A Travel Journal" which recounts various trips in Burma from 13 May 1985 to 2 January 1988. Pantoja-Hidalgo writes her diary with a solid foundation of content and touch of personality that makes all diaries exciting. (There is another example of her diary writing skill in "People Power in Burma.") The towns visited read like a list of exotic places from a Kipling novel or a romantic movie—Maymyo ("And what an improbable little town it is! Old colonial villas, pillared, colonaded, and vine covered, half-hidden by oaks and pines, rainbow hued flowers, horse drawn stage coaches. One might have just stepped back into the British Raj," [p. 40]), Mandalay ("Mandalay presented a series of violent contrasts: jewel studded temples and gilded monasteries standing side by side with wattled hovels penetrated by every wind that blew" [p. 45]), Pagan ("a truly astonishing place. Pagan, haunted and haunting, the decaying splendor of the temples and pagodas a mute testimony to the vanished capital on the eastern shore of the Irrawady" [p. 55]), Taunggyi ("there is something about it that partakes of legend, and song, and dream" [p. 59]), and Kalaw ("another old hill station of the British, a drowsy little town, all terraces and pine trees and flowers and pony carts carrying ladies with pastel-colored sweaters over their *eingyis* and flowers in their hair" [p. 65]).

"The Little White Schoolhouse" is a pleasant piece of autobiographical writing about the author's experiences in teaching Creative Writing, Journalism and Asian Studies at the International High School in Rangoon. The story of a teacher finding satisfaction and students finding joy in learning is the main theme of the autobiographical essay. But there is a depth to the essay (probably unintended and perhaps not even noticed by the author) that might escape the superficial reader. (Or perhaps my admiration of this essay leads me into a bit of over-reading!) I think it is quite clear that the politics of the school (and there are many) and the story of the divorce of Bert and Ellen told as a bit of feminine sharing at school one day are symbols of the nationalism and the politics of the nation. "Looking back on it now," Pantoja-Hidalgo writes, "I realize that the Burmese staff—the women in particular (The avant-garde critic might well make a case for both feminist and colonial readings here!) must have been quite distrustful of me, in my new position . . . I came on too strong, was too bent on changing things" (p. 33). The school-country identification becomes even clearer at the end of the essay: "Peace had been restored to the country, but it was an uneasy peace. There was no telling if or when classes would again be disrupted. All of us were rushing through our lessons and spending extra time with some kids, hoping to get at least our graduating students to finish all their requirements before any such disruptions" (p. 38).

The final two essays in the collection are autobiographical and political. "People Power in Burma" is a diary that Pantoja-Hidalgo kept during the troubled revolutionary days in Burma, from 13 March 1988 to 10 November 1988. The essay begins: "There is fighting going on in the city but we are not able to establish what it is all about" (p. 76). The diary provides a useful bit of contemporary history, written by one on the scene in Rangoon. The final essay is an interview with Aung San Suu Kyi. Pantoja-Hidalgo ends her essay rather sadly: "In May of 1990 Burma held its first multi-party elections in thirty years, and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won an overwhelming majority of the 485 seats in the National Assembly. But though the military authorities promised to step down, they remain in power today. And Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest" (p. 122).

Essays go back at least to classical Greece and Rome, but it was Michel de Montaigne, generally considered "the father of the essay," who really understood that in an essay the trail of the author's thoughts struggling to achieve some understanding of a problem, is the real adventure and the real essay. The essay offers the chance to wrestle with one's own intellectual confusion and to set down one's ideas in a manner that is both more straightforward and more personally revealing than in fiction or drama. It is clear from *Five Years In a Forgotten Land* that Pantoja-Hidalgo's subject and "problem" is really Burma. Her essays are really a struggle to understand the country. She is the first to admit that she has not solved the mystery of

the Burmese, but she does say that she enjoyed her "essay" into Burma. In the introduction she writes about an afternoon in Rangoon: "The Burmese have a name for that magical hour. They call it 'the time when even ugly women look beautiful.' I remember that we stood there for awhile gazing about us. And I remember thinking to myself: never mind that it's a backwater, never mind that this hotel is so very shabby, that there are cobwebs on the ceiling and cockroaches in the bathrooms. There is beauty here. And there is peace. We could be happy here. And we were" (pp. 1-2). The joy and the splendor of this collection is that Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo has done it so well.

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