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The Living and the Dead, by Enriquez

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The Living and the Dead. By Antonio Enriquez. Quezon City: Giraffe Books, 1994. 184 pages.

Novels provide us with an alternative source of history. They allow us to enter into a particular world and glimpse the worldview of a specific culture and time. *The Living and the Dead*, narrated from an omnipotent view point, brings the reader to an understanding of the culture of local aristocrats, particularly in the immediate post World War II Philippines.

This ten-chapter novel narrates how the Gonzaleses, a prominent family in Zamboanga, deal with the illness and the death of their old patriot Don Flavio Gonzales y Villa, around whom the story revolves. Although, ironically, Don Flavio does not utter any single word in the whole novel, his legendary past is remembered and revealed to the reader by the entire Gonzalez family. The exploits of the don are told and retold by his children in two generations. Other voices speak for him.

The story unfolds in three phases: first, the homecoming of Alberto, the grandson of the patriarch, who upon learning that the latter has become bedridden, takes a leave from his work in Cotabato; second, the death of the Don Flavio, which although the family seems to have expected, still catches them in great sorrow; and third, the burial of the don, with all the discussions of the family on what is proper for a dignified final journey for the patriarch.

Although the setting of the story is the compound of the Gonzaleses in Zamboanga, the author roams around places and time in his frequent use of flashbacks, usually to the time of the Japanese and American occupations. The flashbacks also give the reader the sense of history in which this novel is firmly rooted.

If one is looking for action in the *The Living and the Dead*, he will be frustrated, for most of the action in the novel is on the level of emotions and disclosed through the characters' dialogues. It is in the emotions of the characters that the story moves even faster than the changes in setting and time. Ging-ging feels pity over the state of the bedridden old man crying "O, Papalolo is so pitiful . . . Why don't you let him die! We must let him rest!" (p. 94). There is Señorita Clara's angry voice: "*You puñetero, sinvergüenza! Mal criado!*"

That the narrative flows with detailed clarity should not surprise the reader if he knows something about the author, Antonio Enriquez. He is from Zamboanga and his great-great-grandfather was a *gobernadorcillo* himself. Like Alberto in the novel, Antonio had a stint with land-surveying company in Cotabato. Undeniably, the details in the story are anchored deeply in his experiences in the hinterlands and in his old city of Zamboanga.

But the universal appeal of the novel lies, in the end, in the reality of eventual physical incapacity and death. While reading it, one may be brought

to a pause to consider one's own sense of preparation and attitude toward death itself. It faces practical matters like the concern of dividing the inheritance, what kind of coffin shall be used and how much the family can afford, and how the funeral procession shall be done, to more emotional ones that usually face us pointblank when a loved one dies. The allusion to and influence of James Joyce's classic story "The Dead" may be oblique, but it is there.

This novel provides a window to the world of the local aristocrats, but in the end, it does not stop there. It opens for us a bigger window that shows the reality of the living, the dying, and the dead.

Eric Z. Aragones, S.J.