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Fortress in the Plaza, by Casper

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cultural study. All in all, however, the Kroeger book is a valuable work since it clearly shows the progression, linked to events, of the official teachings of the Philippine Church over the past twenty years.

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FORTRESS IN THE PLAZA. By Linda Ty Casper. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1985. 113 pages.

Linda Ty Casper has been writing (mostly historical fiction) for many years. Her contribution to Philippine writing in English is solid, enduring—and growing. She has two collections of short stories (*The Transparent Sun*, 1963 and *The Secret Runner*, 1974), three historical novels (*The Peninsulars*, 1964, *The Three-Cornered Sun*, 1979, and *Ten Thousand Seeds*, 1987) and a number of other works set in more contemporary times (*Dread Empire*, 1980, *Hazards of Distance*, 1981, *Fortress in the Plaza*, 1985, *Awaiting Trespass*, 1985, and *Wings of Stone*, 1986). These ten works in twenty-five years have earned her a significant place in postwar Philippine writing in English. They are carefully crafted and reach for the human heart in a way that many other Philippine writings in English do not. In a perceptive article in *Philippine Studies* [28(1980):59-73], Mrs. Casper wrote that "literature is one way history, which too often reduces life to dates and events, can animate life so that man is returned to the center of human existence." The remark is both descriptive and prescriptive of her own writing, for she says in the first pages of this new novella that *Fortress in the Plaza* "attempts to show how, faced with dark choices, it is possible to live with dignity, courage and grace" (p. 4).

The basic symbol of the novel is the fortress, which ambivalently stands for both the fortress of Philippine society under Martial Law and for the fortress of the Honorio family, as well as for the fortresses that individuals erect within themselves, a theme that goes back to *Hazards of Distance*. Mrs. Casper says quite clearly that "*Fortress* is about the successive fortresses individuals, families and nations erect about themselves" (p. 3). The intentional ambivalence of the basic symbol thus underlines an idea which has occupied Mrs. Casper in almost all her works—the individual is the family is the nation. It is both fortresses and distance which threaten all three of them.

The novel is a magnificent portrait of individuals. There is, at the center, Maxima Ilustre de Honorio, the matriarch, known as Inay to her children and the servants, Imang to relatives and friends, Doña or Impo to others. There is Miguel Honorio, her politician son; and Jess, the would-be priest, her grandson and philosophizing activist; as well as a host of other characters

who leap out of the pages. The novel is also a dynastic chronicle of three generations of the Honorio family with roots in both San Ildefonso and Binondo, and a particularly vivid portrayal of Philippine society in the early 1970s. All exist in fortresses that are to be shattered by the inexorable course of events, both political and personal, which will destroy or change them forever. Within the historical framework of six days in August 1971, is a deeper, more powerful, more human story—the story of unforgettable people.

Under the fortress image lie other subliminal, structural images. There is a complex of journey images—the ironic journey of Miguel from San Ildefonso to escape assassination only to meet it in Manila, the journey of Jess from seminary to activism, and that of Tadeo, who flees first from the Philippines to the United States and then back to the Philippines. All three of these journeys end tragically in Plaza Miranda. There are also the *bildungsroman* journeys of Becky and Ging and Andres and the young cousins who live in the house on Anloague Street, while their parents have scattered to Washington, to New Jersey, to Bicol and to the Presidential Guard. There is the somewhat pathetic journey of Fr. Gonzaga, and there are the tragic journeys of Marta and Pura. They all end tragically in Plaza Miranda or in the house on Anloague.

There are also the images of contemporary dramatic frustration—Ionesco's *Chairs* at Fort Santiago and *Waiting for Godot*, *The Tin Drum* and *Aquarius*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar* at the Meralco Theater, and the ultimate existential drama of Plaza Miranda, and the *queso de bola* on top of the TV set in the midst of the grandchildren in the house on Anloague.

There are, further, the thematic images of violence against human dignity under the Spaniards and the Americans, the cruelty in Japanese times and the thoughtless political slaughter by Filipinos in the postwar era.

One cannot help but be impressed by the structure of the novel, beyond and beneath the images. The time span is just six days, from Monday, August 16 to the Saturday of the Plaza Miranda explosion, with skillful flashbacks to Spanish, American and Japanese times, which expand the horizon of the novel beyond the narrow focus of a single political event in 1971. The centerpiece of the novella is three generations of the Honorio family. Within this framework are the stories of half a dozen journeys in search of identity and definition (Give me a name/ Give me/ Compelling needs/ And humble reasons [p. 19]) against a backdrop of political and personal events. In just 113 pages it is a deceptively rich novella.

I have commented elsewhere that Mrs. Casper's novels are always too short. They cry out for more scope, for a larger canvas. Her characters are so alive and real that they leave you hungry for more. Miguel and Jess and Inay are rich enough, as Mrs. Casper paints them. But Becky, "X-rated" Becky, with egg yolk and lemon juice on her face, who "had gone through a roster of names: Bubot, Reba, Ribí and Becky," needs a novella all her own, as do Tadeo and his pilgrimage into exile in America, and Marta with her journey

into frustration along the streets of Manila. The missing men—Raul in Washington, Fidel in Camarines, Isidro in New Jersey, Emil who wanted to be a doctor—cry out for more room in this novel. Mrs. Casper's novel is alive with people—people she obviously likes—but they are often shadowy bit players on the fringe of the action.

A number of smudges are annoying distractions in the novel. Three bottles of White Horse scotch is straining credibility, even for a Filipino poet exiled from New York, and a Filipino might call it whiskey but never rye (pp. 23-25). There are occasional lapses in idiom. E.g. "Pastor could never erect himself [stand up straight?] after that" (p. 96). Pulo was allowed "as much peanuts" as he could carry home (p. 101). Jaime Vera "stuck his foot into Miguel's chair" (p. 103). An engine that "freaked out at intersections" is startling in the context (p. 101). The back cover of the novel misdates the Plaza Miranda rally in 1972, and other misprints destroy the mood for the attentive reader. This novel is too good to be flawed by annoying errors. It deserved better editing.

Mrs. Casper's place in Philippine writing in English is assured. She writes with discipline and with vision. She has a sharp eye for the detail which adds to the setting or the mood. In the historical context she has a compassionate touch and sympathy with her characters. In her fiction, people are "returned to the center of human existence." That is no mean accomplishment for a writer!

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