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The Bellringer and Other Stories

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as the other. . . .”

Indeed, Cris Magat is a praying/preying paradox, a man whose infidelities and calculating, manipulative handling of personal and business relationships Santos juxtaposes against the faithfulness of Grace, Mila and Kosca; the treachery of Naldo; the malleability of the “little” men whose positions of power in Cris’ firm depend precisely on their clay-like qualities. To watch Cris act on these characters (he rarely, if ever, interacts, except with Kosca and perhaps Mila), is to watch his mind at work. It takes something more, however, to expose his heart and soul—a betrayal, a loss. In the final treachery, committed by a man he had once thoroughly trusted, Cris’ soul-baring is completed.

In the last chapters of the novel, the praying man stands revealed—vulnerable, groping for loyalty, begging for the Virgin’s aid, for once unable to control the future. But the mantis does not stop being a mantis, unless crushed beneath someone’s heel. And Cris Magat is not crushed yet. He returns to the Philippines, still uncertain of the future, but determined to fight his way out of the pit of betrayal—or bring down others, big men, with him.

Bienvenido Santos’ *The Praying Man* is a disturbing novel, with the unsettling realism of bad news. When one finally puts down the book, one becomes conscious of a sudden tiredness, a vague longing for some clean, free air. Confronting reality, after all, is never a restful experience.

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THE BELLRINGER AND OTHER STORIES. By Abelardo S. Albis.
 Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1982. 104 pages.

The fifteen stories in the collection, says Bienvenido N. Santos, “bring back an era of innocence to our times.” Spanning almost half a century, they reflect a world of simpler living, of stark truths and well-defined values.

The theme of love runs like a thread through many of them: a growing boy’s nascent love, the unrequited love of a poor bellringer, a young maiden’s betrayed love, but mostly, maternal love. There is the mother who angrily orders her two boys out of the house, only to sing them a lullaby when she finds them sleeping in the open field; the mother refusing to believe her son will never return; the mother who prefers to see her daughter dead than allow a young man to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation; the mother disappointed over her son’s refusal of a gift; a paralytic mother who gives up her child to a midwife.

The stories are literary—at times, perhaps, too literary, as when the author

writes of "the apparent portent of her words," "flood of ineffable bliss," "unalloyed approbation," and describes characters sad "with eyes involute with unutterable words." This preciousity is sometimes incorporated in ordinary dialogue so that it sounds stilted, as when the painter tells his model, "Stand in front of this *heavy mass of velvet curtain*, please." (Italics added.) However, there are also moments when the vernacular flavor is caught, for example, when the bellringer asks the girl he has fallen in love with: "Tell me, please, if I have hope."

The imagery is consistently of a piece; it is woven of local color—"thoughtless and valueless as bamboo shoots." The symbols are recognizable and uncluttered: magnolias for a fleeting and innocent past, pine trees for strength, flowers for hope, a new moth for resilience.

The story-telling, as Mr. Santos notes, is "at its simplest, without pretense." Artless as these stories may be, they nevertheless ring with authenticity. We sense the writer actually describing himself in the lonely government scholar aboard the ship that will take him to the United States. Only a man lashed by the memories of innumerable typhoons, as a Bicolano is, could describe one so vividly. We feel he has personally known the father of the condemned convict, too cowardly to break the truth to his son. The only story that seems a bit contrived is that of the escaped convict who returns home to his wife and boy, only to give them up in the end. Somehow it recalls too closely a Pilipino movie tearjerker.

Two of the stories in the collection hardly qualify as stories, being much too short. But the rest are a feast for all of us with a "nostalgia for well remembered haunts of the past."

It is a pity that Abelardo S. Albis, who spent forty-six years in teaching and supervisory work, did not include any story of teachers. We hope this will be rectified in his next collection.

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SOME ARRIVALS, BUT MOSTLY DEPARTURES. By Paul Stephen Lim. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1982. 132 pages.

For many Filipinos, Paul Stephen Lim's credentials as a writer come chiefly from five Palanca Memorial Awards (1974-1978) and from his play *Con-personas*, which won the best original script competition of the 1976 American College Theater Festival.

Except for one, all the stories in this collection have been published in magazines and journals, especially *Solidarity*. The first and last stories are